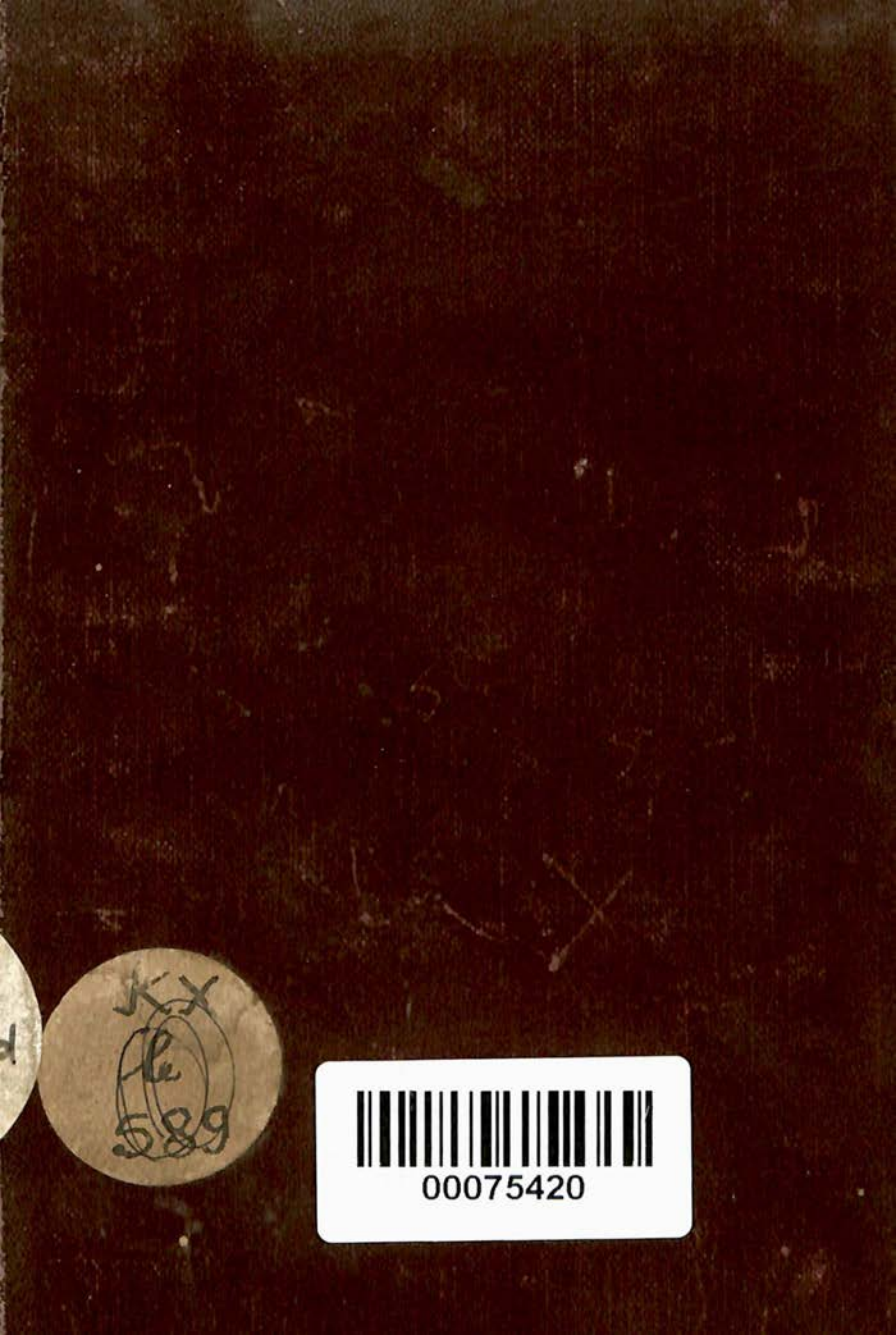
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LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

BY

M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "AURORA FLOYD."

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret."

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I. PAGE

THE RED LIGHT IN THE SKY 1

CHAPTER II.

THE BEARER OF THE TIDINGS 39

CHAPTER III.

MY LADY TELLS THE TRUTH 70

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUSH THAT SUCCEEDS THE TEMPEST 103

CHAPTER V.

DR. MOSGRAVE'S ADVICE 129

CHAPTER VI.

BURIED ALIVE 149

CHAPTER VII.

GHOST-HAUNTED 175

CHAPTER VIII.

THAT WHICH THE DYING MAN HAD TO TELL 220

CHAPTER IX.

RESTORED . . . . . .

CHAPTER X.

AT PEACE . . . . . .

LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

THE RED LIGHT IN THE SKY.

The door between my lady's dressing-room and the bedchamber in which Sir Michael lay, had been left open. The baronet slept peacefully, his noble face plainly visible in the subdued lamplight. His breathing was low and regular, his lips curved in a half smile—a smile of tender happiness which he often wore when he looked at his beautiful wife, the smile of an all-indulgent father, who looked admiringly at his favourite child.

Some touch of womanly feeling, some sentiment of compassion softened Lady Audley's glance as it fell upon that noble reposing figure.

For a moment the horrible egotism of her own misery yielded to her pitying tenderness for another. It was perhaps only a semi-selfish tenderness after all, in which pity for herself was as powerful as pity for her husband; but for once in a way, her thoughts ran out of the narrow groove of her own terrors and her own troubles to dwell with prophetic grief upon the coming sorrows of another.

"If they make him believe, how wretched he will be," she thought.

But intermingled with that thought there was another—there was the thought of her lovely face, her bewitching manner, her arch smile, her low musical laugh, which was like a peal of silvery bells ringing across a broad expanse of flat pasture, and a rippling river in the misty summer evening. She thought of all these things with a transient thrill of triumph, which was stronger even than her terror.

If Sir Michael Audley lived to be a hundred years old, whatever he might learn to believe of her, however he might grow to despise her, would

he ever be able to disassociate her from these attributes? No; a thousand times, no. To the last hour of his life his memory would present her to him invested with the loveliness that had first won his enthusiastic admiration, his devoted affection. Her worst enemies could not rob her of that fairy dower which had been so fatal in its influence upon her frivolous mind.

She paced up and down the dressing-room in the silvery lamplight, pondering upon the strange letter which she had received from Robert Audley. She walked backwards and forwards in that monotonous wandering for some time before she was able to steady her thoughts—before she was able to bring the scattered forces of her narrow intellect to bear upon the one all-important subject of the threat contained in the barrister's letter.

"He will do it," she said, between her set teeth; "he will do it, unless I get him into a lunatic asylum first; or unless—"

She did not finish the thought in words. She did not even think out the sentence; but some

new and unnatural pulse in her heart seemed to beat out each separate syllable against her breast.

The thought was this: "He will do it, unless some strange calamity befalls him and silences him for ever." The red blood flashed up into my lady's face with as sudden and transient a blaze as the flickering flame of a fire, and died as suddenly away, leaving her more pale than winter snow. Her hands, which had before been locked convulsively together, fell apart and dropped heavily at her sides. She stopped in her rapid pacing to and fro—stopped as Lot's wife may have stopped, after that fatal backward glance at the perishing city, with every pulse slackening, with every drop of blood congealing in her veins, in the terrible process that was to transform her from a woman into a statue.

Lady Audley stood still for about five minutes in that strangely statuesque attitude, her head erect, her eyes staring straight before her—staring far beyond the narrow boundary of her chamber wall, into dark distances of peril and horror.

But, by-and-by, she started from that rigid attitude almost as abruptly as she had fallen into it. She roused herself from that semi-lethargy, and walked rapidly to her dressing-table, and seating herself before it, pushed away the litter of golden-stoppered bottles, and delicate china-essence-boxes, and looked at her reflection in the large oval glass. She was very pale; but there was no other trace of agitation visible in her girlish face. The lines of her exquisitely-moulded lips were so beautiful, that it was only a very close observer who could have perceived a certain rigidity that was unusual to them. She saw this herself, and tried to smile away that statue-like immobility; but to-night the rosy lips refused to obey her, they were firmly locked, and were no longer the slaves of her will and pleasure. All the latent forces of her character concentrated themselves in this one feature. She might command her eyes; but she could not control the muscles of her mouth. She rose from before her dressing-table and took a dark velvet cloak and bonnet from the recesses of her ward-

robe, and dressed herself for walking. The little ormolu clock on the chimney-piece struck the quarter after eleven while Lady Audley was employed in this manner; five minutes afterwards, she re-entered the room in which she had left Phœbe Marks.

The innkeeper's wife was sitting before the low hearth very much in the same attitude as that in which her late mistress had brooded over that lonely hearth earlier in the evening. Phœbe had replenished the fire, and had reassumed her bonnet and shawl. She was anxious to get home to that brutal husband, who was only too apt to fall into some mischief in her absence. She looked up as Lady Audley entered the room, and uttered an exclamation of surprise at seeing her mistress in a walking costume.

"My lady," she cried, "you are not going out to-night?"

"Yes, I am Phœbe," Lady Audley answered, very quietly; "I am going to Mount Stanning with you, to see this bailiff, and to pay and dismiss him myself."

"But, my lady, you forget what the time is; you can't go out at such an hour."

Lady Audley did not answer. She stood, with her fingers resting lightly upon the handle of the bell, meditating quietly.

"The stables are always locked, and the men in bed by ten o'clock," she murmured, "when we are at home. It will make a terrible hubbub to get a carriage ready; but yet I dare say one of the servants could manage the matter quietly for me."

"But why should you go to-night, my lady?" cried Phœbe Marks. "To-morrow will do quite as well. A week hence will do as well. Our landlord would take the man away if he had your promise to settle the debt."

Lady Audley took no notice of this interruption. She went hastily into the dressing-room, and flung off her bonnet and cloak, and then returned to the boudoir, in her simple dinner costume, with her curls brushed carelessly away from her face. "Now, Phœbe Marks, listen to me," she said, grasping her *confidante's* wrist, and

speaking in a low, earnest voice, but with a certain imperious air that challenged contradiction, and commanded obedience.

"Listen to me, Phœbe," she said, "I am going to the Castle Inn, to-night; whether it is early or late is of very little consequence to me; I have set my mind upon going, and I shall go. You have asked me why, and I have told you. I am going in order that I may pay this debt myself, and that I may see for myself that the money I give is applied to the purpose for which I give it. There is nothing out of the common course of life in my doing this. I am going to do what other women in my position very often do. I am going to assist a favourite servant."

"But it's getting on for twelve o'clock, my lady," pleaded Phœbe.

Lady Audley frowned impatiently at this interruption.

"If my going to your house to pay this man should be known," she continued, still retaining her hold of Phœbe's wrist, "I am ready to answer for my conduct: but I would rather that

the business should be kept quiet. I think that I can leave this house and return to it without being seen by any living creature, if you will do as I tell you."

"I will do anything that you wish, my lady," answered Phœbe, submissively.

"Then you will wish me good-night presently, when my maid comes into the room, and you will suffer her to show you out of the house. You will cross the courtyard and wait for me in the avenue upon the other side of the archway. It may be half an hour before I am able to join you, for I must not leave my room till the servants have all gone to bed; but you may wait for me patiently, for come what may, I will join you."

Lady Audley's face was no longer pale. An unnatural crimson spot burned in the centre of each rounded cheek, and an unnatural lustre gleamed in her great blue eyes. She spoke with an unnatural clearness, and an unnatural rapidity. She had altogether the appearance and manner of a person who has yielded to the dominant influence of some overpowering excitement.

Phœbe Marks stared at her late mistress in mute bewilderment. She began to fear that my lady was going mad.

The bell which Lady Audley rang was answered by the smart lady's maid, who wore rose-coloured ribbons and black silk gowns, and other adornments which were unknown to the humble people who sat below the salt in the good old days when servants wore linsey-woolsey.

"I did not know that it was so late, Martin," said my lady, in that gentle tone which always won for her the willing service of her inferiors. "I have been talking with Mrs. Marks, and have let the time slip by me. I shan't want anything to-night, so you may go to bed when you please."

"Thank you, my lady," answered the girl, who looked very sleepy, and had some difficulty in repressing a yawn even in her mistress's presence, for the Audley household usually kept very early hours. "I'd better show Mrs. Marks out, my lady, hadn't I," asked the maid, "before I go to bed?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure, you can let Phœbe out.

All the other servants have gone to bed, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Audley laughed as she glanced at the time-piece.

"We have been terribly dissipated up here, Phœbe," she said. "Good night. You may tell your husband that his rent shall be paid."

"Thank you very much, my lady, and good-night," murmured Phœbe, as she backed out of the room followed by the lady's maid.

Lady Audley listened at the door, waiting till the muffled sound of their footsteps died away in the octagon chamber, and on the carpeted staircase.

"Martin sleeps at the top of the house," she said, "ever so far away from this room. In ten minutes I may safely make my escape."

She went back into her dressing-room, and put on her cloak and bonnet for the second time. The unnatural colour still burnt like a flame in her cheeks, the unnatural light still glittered in her eyes. The excitement which she was under

held her in so strong a spell that neither her mind nor her body seemed to have any consciousness of fatigue. However verbose I may be in my description of her feelings, I can never describe a tithe of her thoughts or her sufferings. She suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages, in that one horrible night. She underwent volumes of anguish, and doubt, and perplexity. Sometimes repeating the same chapters of her torments over and over again. Sometimes hurrying through a thousand pages of her misery without one pause, without one moment of breathing time. She stood by the low fender in her boudoir, watching the minute hand of the clock, and waiting till it should be time for her to leave the house in safety.

"I will wait ten minutes," she said, "not a moment beyond, before I enter upon my new peril."

She listened to the wild roaring of the March wind, which seemed to have risen with the stillness and darkness of the night.

The hand slowly made its inevitable way to the figures which told that the ten minutes were past. It was exactly a quarter to twelve when my lady took her lamp in her hand, and stole softly from the room. Her footfall was as light as that of some graceful wild animal, and there was no fear of that airy step awakening any echo upon the carpeted stone corridors and staircase. She did not pause until she reached the vestibule upon the ground floor. Several doors opened out of this vestibule, which was octagon, like my lady's ante-chamber. One of these doors led into the library, and it was this door which Lady Audley opened softly and cautiously.

To have attempted to leave the house secretly by any of the principal outlets would have been simple madness, for the housekeeper herself superintended the barricading of the great doors, back and front. The secrets of the bolts, and bars, and chains, and bells which secured these doors, and provided for the safety of Sir Michael Audley's plate-room, the door of which was lined

with sheet-iron, were known only to the servants who had to deal with them. But although all these precautions were taken with the principal entrances to the citadel, a wooden shutter and a slender iron bar, light enough to be lifted by a child, were considered sufficient safeguard for the half-glass door which opened out of the breakfast-room into the gravelled pathway and smooth turf in the courtyard.

It was by this outlet that Lady Audley meant to make her escape. She could easily remove the bar and unfasten the shutter, and she might safely venture to leave the window ajar while she was absent. There was little fear of Sir Michael's awaking for some time, as he was a heavy sleeper in the earlier part of the night, and had slept more heavily than usual since his illness.

Lady Audley crossed the library, and opened the door of the breakfast-room which communicated with it. This latter apartment was one of the modern additions to the Court. It was a simple, cheerful chamber, with brightly-papered

walls and pretty maple furniture, and was more occupied by Alicia than any one else. The paraphernalia of that young lady's favourite pursuits were scattered about the room—drawing materials, unfinished scraps of work, tangled skeins of silk, and all the other tokens of a careless damsel's presence; while Miss Audley's picture—a pretty crayon sketch of a rosy-faced hoyden in a riding-habit and hat—hung over the quaint Wedgwood ornaments on the chimney-piece. My lady looked upon these familiar objects with scornful hatred flaming in her blue eyes.

"How glad *she* will be if any disgrace befalls me!" she thought; "how *she* will rejoice if I am driven out of this house!"

Lady Audley set the lamp upon a table near the fireplace, and went to the window. She removed the iron bar and the light wooden shutter, and then opened the glass door. The March night was black and moonless, and a gust of wind blew in upon her as she opened this door, and filled the room with its chilly breath, extinguishing the lamp upon the table.

"No matter," my lady muttered, "I could not have left it burning. I shall know how to find my way through the house when I come back. I have left all the doors ajar."

She stepped quickly out upon the smooth gravel, and closed the glass-door behind her. She was afraid lest that treacherous wind should blow-to the door opening into the library, and thus betray her.

She was in the quadrangle now, with that chill wind sweeping against her, and swirling her silken garments round her with a shrill rustling noise, like the whistling of a sharp breeze against the sails of a yacht. She crossed the quadrangle and looked back—looked back for a moment at the fire-light gleaming through the rosy-tinted curtains in her boudoir, and the dim gleam of the lamp behind the mullioned windows in the room where Sir Michael Audley lay asleep.

"I feel as if I was running away," she thought. "I feel as if I was running away secretly in the dead of the night, to lose myself and be forgotten. Perhaps it would be wiser in me to run away, to

take this man's warning, and escape out of his power for ever. If I were to run away and disappear—as George Talboys disappeared. But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money: my jewels are not worth a couple of hundred pounds, now that I have got rid of the best part of them. What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life—the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die—as my mother died, perhaps."

My lady stood still for a moment on the smooth lawn between the quadrangle and the archway, with her head drooping upon her breast and her hands locked together, debating this question in the unnatural activity of her mind. Her attitude reflected the state of that mind—it expressed irresolution and perplexity. But presently a sudden change came over her; she lifted her head—lifted it with an action of defiance and determination.

"No, Mr. Robert Audley," she said aloud, in a

low, clear voice; "I will not go back—I will not go back. If the struggle between us is to be a duel to the death, you shall not find me drop my weapon."

She walked with a firm and rapid step under the archway. As she passed under that massive arch, it seemed as if she disappeared into some black gulf that had waited open to receive her. The stupid clock struck twelve, and the solid masonry seemed to vibrate under its heavy strokes, as Lady Audley emerged upon the other side, and joined Phœbe Marks, who had waited for her late mistress very near the gateway of the Court.

"Now, Phœbe," she said, "it is three miles from here to Mount Stanning, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then we can walk it in an hour."

Lady Audley had not stopped to say this; she was walking quickly along the avenue with her humble companion by her side. Fragile and delicate as she was in appearance, she was a very good walker. She had been in the habit of

taking long country rambles with Mr. Dawson's children in her old days of dependence, and she thought very little of a distance of three miles.

"Your beautiful husband will sit up for you, I suppose, Phœbe?" she said, as they struck across an open field that was used as a short cut from Audley Court to the high road.

"Oh, yes, my lady; he's sure to sit up. He'll be drinking with the man, I dare say."

"The man! What man?"

"The man that's in possession, my lady."

"Ah, to be sure," said Lady Audley, indifferently.

It was strange that Phœbe's domestic troubles should seem so very far away from her thoughts at the time she was taking such an extraordinary step towards setting things right at the Castle Inn.

The two women crossed the field and turned into the high road. The way to Mount Stanning was very hilly, and the long road looked black and dreary in the dark night; but my lady walked on with a desperate courage, which was no common

constituent in her selfish, sensuous nature; but a strange faculty born out of her great despair. She did not speak again to her companion until they were close upon the glimmering lights at the top of the hill, one of which village lights, gleaming redly through a crimson curtain, marked out the particular window behind which it was likely that Luke Marks sat nodding drowsily over his liquor, and waiting for the coming of his wife.

"He has not gone to bed, Phœbe," said my lady, eagerly. "But there is no other light burning at the inn. I suppose Mr. Audley is in bed and asleep."

"Yes, my lady, I suppose so."

"You are sure he was going to stay at the Castle to-night?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. I helped the girl to get his room ready before I came away."

The wind, boisterous everywhere, was shriller and more pitiless in the neighbourhood of that bleak hill-top upon which the Castle Inn reared its rickety walls. The cruel blasts danced wildly round that frail erection. They disported them-

selves with the shattered pigeon-house, the broken weathercock, the loose tiles, and unshapely chimneys; they rattled at the window-panes, and whistled in the crevices; they mocked the feeble building from foundation to roof, and battered and banged and tormented it in their fierce gambols, until it trembled and rocked with the force of their rough play.

Mr. Luke Marks had not troubled himself to secure the door of his dwelling-house before sitting down to drink with the man who held provisional possession of his goods and chattels. The landlord of the Castle Inn was a lazy, sensual brute, who had no thought higher than a selfish concern for his own enjoyments, and a virulent hatred of anybody who stood in the way of his gratification.

Phœbe pushed open the door with her hand, and went into the house, followed by my lady. The gas was flaring in the bar, and smoking the low, plastered ceiling. The door of the bar-parlour was half open, and Lady Audley heard the brutal laughter of Mr. Marks as she crossed the threshold of the inn.

"I'll tell him you're here, my lady," whispered Phœbe to her late mistress. "I know he'll be tipsy. You—you won't be offended, my lady, if he should say anything rude. You know it wasn't my wish that you should come."

"Yes, yes," answered Lady Audley, impatiently, "I know that. What should I care for his rudeness? Let him say what he likes."

Phœbe Marks pushed open the parlour door, leaving my lady in the bar close behind her.

Luke sat with his clumsy legs stretched out upon the hearth; with a glass of gin-and-water in one hand and the poker in the other. He had just thrust the poker into a great heap of black coals, and was shattering them to make a blaze, when his wife appeared upon the threshold of the room.

He snatched the poker from between the bars, and made a half-drunken, half-threatening motion with it as he saw her.

"So you've condescended to come home at last, ma'am," he said; "I thought you was never coming no more."

He spoke in a thick and drunken voice, and was by no means too intelligible. He was steeped to the very lips in alcohol. His eyes were dim and watery; his hands were unsteady; his voice was choked and muffled with drink. A brute, even when most sober; a brute, even when on his best behaviour; he was ten times more brutal in his drunkenness, when the few restraints which held his ignorant, every-day brutality in check were flung aside in the insolent recklessness of intoxication.

"I—I've been longer than I intended to be, Luke," Phœbe answered, in her most conciliatory manner; "but I've seen my lady, and she's been very kind, and—and she'll settle this business for us."

"She's been very kind, has she?" muttered Mr. Marks, with a drunken laugh; "thank her for nothing. I know the vally of her kindness. She'd be oncommon kind, I dessay, if she warn't obligated to be it."

The man in possession, who had fallen into a maudlin and semi-unconscious state of intoxica-

tion upon about a third of the liquor that Mr. Marks had consumed, only stared in feeble wonderment at his host and hostess. He sat near the table. Indeed, he had hooked himself on to it with his elbows, as a safeguard against sliding under it, and he was making inane attempts to light his pipe at the flame of a guttering tallow candle near him.

"My lady has promised to settle the business for us," Phœbe repeated, without noticing Luke's remarks; she knew her husband's dogged nature well enough by this time to know that it was worse than useless to try to stop him from doing or saying anything which his own stubborn will led him to do or say; "and she's come down here to see about it to-night, Luke," she added.

The poker dropped from the landlord's hand, and fell clattering amongst the cinders on the hearth.

"My LadyAudley come here to-night," he said

"Yes, Luke."

My lady appeared upon the threshold of the door as Phœbe spoke.

"Yes, Luke Marks," she said, "I have come to pay this man, and to send him about his business."

Lady Audley said these words in a strange semi-mechanical manner, very much as if she had learned the sentence by rote, and were repeating it without knowing what she said.

Mr. Marks gave a discontented growl, and set his empty glass down upon the table, with an impatient gesture.

"You might have given the money to Phœbe," he said, "as well as have brought it yourself. We don't want no fine ladies up here, pryin' and pokin' their precious noses into everythink."

"Luke, Luke," remonstrated Phœbe, "when my lady has been so kind!"

"Oh, damn her kindness!" cried Mr. Marks; "it ain't her kindness as we want, gal, it's her money. She won't get no snivellin' gratitood from me. Whatever she does for us she does because she is obliged, and if she warn't obliged she wouldn't do it—"

Heaven knows how much more Luke Marks

might have said, had not my lady turned upon him suddenly, and awed him into silence by the unearthly glitter of her beauty. Her hair had been blown away from her face, and, being of a light, feathery quality, had spread itself into a tangled mass that surrounded her forehead like a yellow flame. There was another flame in her eyes—a greenish light, such as might flash from the changing hued orbs of an angry mermaid.

"Stop," she cried. "I didn't come up here in the dead of the night to listen to your insolence. How much is this debt?"

"Nine pound."

Lady Audley produced her purse—a toy of ivory, silver, and turquoise — and took from it a bank-note and four sovereigns. She laid these upon the table.

"Let that man give me a receipt for the money," she said, "before I go."

It was some time before the man could be roused into sufficient consciousness for the performance of this simple duty, and it was only by dipping a pen into the ink and pushing it be-

tween his clumsy fingers, that he was at last made to comprehend that his autograph was wanted at the bottom of the receipt which had been made out by Phœbe Marks. Lady Audley took the document as soon as the ink was dry, and turned to leave the parlour. Phœbe followed her.

"You musn't go home alone, my lady," she said. "You'll let me go with you?"

"Yes, yes, you shall go home with me."

The two women were standing near the door of the inn as my lady said this. Phœbe stared wonderingly at her patroness. She had expected that Lady Audley would be in a hurry to return home after settling this business which she had capriciously taken upon herself; but it was not so; my lady stood leaning against the inn door and staring into vacancy, and again Mrs. Marks began to fear that trouble had driven her late mistress mad.

A little Dutch clock in the bar struck one while Lady Audley lingered in this irresolute, absent manner.

She started at the sound and began to tremble violently.

"I think I am going to faint, Phœbe," she said; "where can I get some cold water?"

"The pump is in the washhouse, my lady, I'll run and get you a glass of water."

"No, no, no," cried my lady, clutching Phœbe's arm as she was about to run away upon this errand, "I'll get it myself. I must dip my head in a basin of water if I want to save myself from fainting. In which room does Mr. Audley sleep?"

There was something so irrelevant in this question that Phœbe Marks stared aghast at her mistress before she answered it.

"It was number three that I got ready, my lady—the front room—the room next to ours," she replied, after that pause of astonishment.

"Give me a candle," said my lady; "I'll go into your room, and get some water for my head. Stay where you are," she added authoritatively, as Phœbe Marks was about to show the way — "stay where you are, and see that

that brute of a husband of yours doesn't follow me!"

She snatched the candle which Phœbe had lighted, from the girl's hand; and ran up the rickety, winding staircase which led to the narrow corridor upon the upper floor. Five bed-rooms opened out of this low-ceilinged, close-smelling corridor: the numbers of these rooms were indicated by squat black figures painted upon the upper panels of the doors. Lady Audley had driven to Mount Stanning to inspect the house, when she had bought the business for her servant's bridegroom, and she knew her way about the dilapidated old place; she knew where to find Phœbe's bed-room; but she stopped before the door of that other chamber which had been prepared for Mr. Robert Audley.

She stopped and looked at the number on the door. The key was in the lock, and her hand dropped upon it as if unconsciously. Then she suddenly began to tremble again, as she had trembled a few minutes before at the striking of the clock. She stood for a few moments trem-

bling thus, with her hand still upon the key; then a horrible expression came over her face, and she turned the key in the lock; she turned it twice, double locking the door.

There was no sound from within; the occupant of the chamber made no sign of having heard that ominous creaking of the rusty key in the rusty lock.

Lady Audley hurried into the next room. She set the candle on the dressing-table, flung off her bonnet and slung it loosely across her arm; she went to the wash-hand-stand and filled the basin with water. She plunged her golden hair into this water, and then stood for a few moments in the centre of the room looking about her, with a white earnest face, and an eager gaze that seemed to take in every object in the poorly furnished chamber. Phœbe's bedroom was certainly very shabbily furnished; she had been compelled to select all the most decent things for those best bedrooms which were set apart for any chance traveller who might stop for a night's lodging at the Castle Inn. But Mrs. Marks had

done her best to atone for the lack of substantial furniture in her apartment by a superabundance of drapery. Crisp curtains of cheap chintz hung from the tent-bedstead; festooned draperies of the same material shrouded the narrow window, shutting out the light of day, and affording a pleasant harbour for tribes of flies and predatory bands of spiders. Even the looking-glass, a miserably cheap construction which distorted every face whose owner had the hardihood to look into it, stood upon a draperied altar of starched muslin and pink glazed calico, and was adorned with frills of lace and knitted work.

My lady smiled as she looked at the festoons and furbelows which met her eye upon every side. She had reason, perhaps, to smile, remembering the costly elegance of her own apartments; but there was something in that sardonic smile that seemed to have a deeper meaning than any natural contempt for Phœbe's poor attempts at decoration. She went to the dressing-table and smoothed her wet hair before the looking-glass, and then put on her bonnet. She was obliged

to place the flaming tallow candle very close to the lace furbelows about the glass, so close that the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it by some power of attraction in its fragile tissue.

Phœbe waited anxiously by the inn-door for my lady's coming. She watched the minute hand of the little Dutch clock, wondering at the slowness of its progress. It was only ten minutes past one when Lady Audley came down-stairs, with her bonnet on and her hair still wet, but without the candle.

Phœbe was immediately anxious about this missing candle.

"The light, my lady," she said; "you have left it up-stairs!"

"The wind blew it out as I was leaving your room," Lady Audley answered, quietly. "I left it there."

"In my room, my lady?"

"Yes."

"And it was quite out?"

"Yes, I tell you; why do you worry me about your candle? It is past one o'clock. Come."

She took the girl's arm, and half-led, half-dragged her from the house. The convulsive pressure of her slight hand held her companion as firmly as an iron vice could have held her. The fierce March wind banged-to the door of the house, and left the two women standing outside it. The long black road lay bleak and desolate before them, dimly visible between the leafless hedges.

A walk of three miles' length upon a lonely country road, between the hours of one and two on a cold winter's morning, is scarcely a pleasant task for a delicate woman—a woman whose inclinations lean towards ease and luxury. But my lady hurried along the hard dry highway, dragging her companion with her as if she had been impelled by some horrible demoniac force which knew no abatement. With the black night above them—with the fierce wind howling round them, sweeping across a broad expanse of hidden country, blowing as if it had arisen simultaneously

from every point of the compass, and making those wretched wanderers the focus of its ferocity —the two women walked through the darkness down the hill upon which Mount Stanning stood, along a mile and a half of flat road, and then up another hill, on the western side of which Audley Court lay in that sheltered valley, which seemed to shut in the old house from all the clamour and hubbub of the every-day world.

My lady stopped upon the summit of this hill to draw breath and to clasp her hands upon her heart, in the vain hope that she might still its cruel beating. They were now within three quarters of a mile of the Court, and they had been walking for nearly an hour since they had left the Castle Inn.

Lady Audley stopped to rest with her face still turned towards the place of her destination. Phœbe Marks, stopping also, and very glad of a moment's pause in that hurried journey, looked back into the far darkness beneath which lay that dreary shelter which had given her so much uneasiness. As she did so, she uttered a shrill

cry of horror, and clutched wildly at Lady Audley's cloak.

The night sky was no longer all dark. The thick blackness was broken by one patch of lurid light.

"My lady, my lady," cried Phœbe, pointing to this lurid patch, "do you see?"

"Yes, child, I see," answered Lady Audley, trying to shake the clinging hands from her garments. "What is the matter?"

"It is a fire!—a fire, my lady."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is a fire. At Brentwood most likely. Let me go, Phœbe, it is nothing to us."

"Yes, yes, my lady, it's nearer than Brentwood—much nearer; it's at Mount Stanning."

Lady Audley did not answer. She was trembling again, with the cold, perhaps, for the wind had torn her heavy cloak away from her shoulders, and had left her slender figure exposed to the blast.

"It's at Mount Stanning, my lady," cried Phœbe Marks. "It's the Castle that's on fire—

I know it is, I know it is. I thought of fire to-night, and I was fidgety and uneasy, for I knew this would happen some day. I wouldn't mind if it was only the wretched place, but there'll be life lost; there'll be life lost," sobbed the girl, distractedly. "There's Luke, too tipsy to help himself, unless others help him; there's Mr. Audley asleep——"

Phœbe Marks stopped suddenly at the mention of Robert's name, and fell upon her knees, clasping her uplifted hands, and appealing wildly to Lady Audley.

"Oh, my God!" she cried. "Say it's not true, my lady; say it isn't true. It's too horrible, it's too horrible, it's too horrible!"

"What's too horrible?"

"The thought that's in my mind; the dreadful thought that's in my mind."

"What do you mean, girl?" cried my lady, fiercely.

"Oh, God forgive me if I'm wrong!" the kneeling woman gasped, in detached sentences, "and God grant I may be! Why did you go up

to the Castle to-night, my lady? Why were you so set on going, against all I could say—you who are so bitter against Mr. Audley and against Luke, and who knew they were both under that roof? Oh, tell me that I do you a cruel wrong, my lady; tell me so—tell me; for as there is a heaven above me, I think that you went to that place to-night on purpose to set fire to it. Tell me that I'm wrong, my lady; tell me that I'm doing you a wicked wrong."

"I will tell you nothing except that you are a mad woman," answered Lady Audley, in a cold, hard voice. "Get up, fool, idiot, coward! Is your husband such a precious bargain that you should be grovelling there, lamenting and groaning for him? What is Robert Audley to you, that you behave like a maniac, because you think he is in danger? How do you know that the fire is at Mount Stanning? You see a red patch in the sky, and you cry out directly that your own paltry hovel is in flames; as if there were no place in the world that could burn except that. The fire may be at Brentwood, or further

away—at Romford, or still further away; on the eastern side of London, perhaps. Get up, mad woman, and go back and look after your goods and chattels, and your husband and your lodger. Get up and go; I don't want you."

"Oh, my lady, my lady, forgive me," sobbed Phœbe; "there's nothing you can say to me that's hard enough for having done you such a wrong, even in my thoughts. I don't mind your cruel words—I don't mind anything if I'm wrong."

"Go back and see for yourself," answered Lady Audley, sternly. "I tell you again I don't want you."

She walked away in the darkness, leaving Phœbe Marks still kneeling upon the hard road, where she had cast herself in that agony of supplication. Sir Michael's wife walked towards the house in which her husband slept, with the red blaze lighting up the skies behind her, and with nothing but the blackness of the night before.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEARER OF THE TIDINGS.

It was very late the next morning when Lady Audley emerged from her dressing-room, exquisitely dressed in a morning costume of delicate muslin, elaborate laces, and embroideries; but with a very pale face, and with half-circles of purple shadow under her eyes. She accounted for this pale face and these hollow eyes by declaring that she had sat up reading until a very late hour on the previous night.

Sir Michael and his young wife breakfasted in the library at a comfortable round table, wheeled close to the blazing fire; and Alicia was compelled to share this meal with her step-mother, however she might avoid that lady in the long interval between breakfast and dinner.

The March morning was bleak and dull, and a drizzling rain fell incessantly, obscuring the land-

scape, and blotting out the distance. There were very few letters by the morning's post; the daily newspapers did not arrive until noon; and such aids to conversation being missing, there was very little talk at the breakfast-table.

Alicia looked out at the drizzling rain drifting against the broad window-panes.

"No riding to-day," she said; "and no chance of any callers to enliven us; unless that ridiculous Bob comes crawling through the wet from Mount Stanning."

Have you ever heard anybody, whom you knew to be dead, alluded to in a light, easy-going manner by another person who did not know of his death—alluded to as doing that or this—as performing some trivial every-day operation—when *you* know that he has vanished away from the face of this earth, and separated himself for ever from all living creatures and their common-place pursuits, in the awful solemnity of death? Such a chance allusion, insignificant though it may be, is apt to send a strange thrill of pain through the mind. The ignorant remark jars discordantly

upon the hyper-sensitive brain; the King of Terrors is desecrated by that unwitting disrespect. Heaven knows what hidden reason my lady may have had for experiencing some such revulsion of feeling on the sudden mention of Mr. Audley's name; but her pale face blanched to a sickly white as Alicia Audley spoke of her cousin.

"Yes, he will come down here in the wet, perhaps," the young lady continued, "with his hat sleek and shining as if it had been brushed with a pat of fresh butter; and with white vapours steaming out of his clothes, and making him look like an awkward genie just let out of his bottle. He will come down here and print impressions of his muddy boots all over the carpet, and he'll sit on your Gobelin tapestry, my lady, in his wet overcoat; and he'll abuse you if you remonstrate, and will ask why people have chairs that are not to be sat upon, and why you don't live in Fig-tree-court, and—"

Sir Michael Audley watched his daughter with a thoughtful countenance as she talked of her

cousin. She very often talked of him, ridiculing him and inveighing against him in no very measured terms. But, perhaps, the baronet thought of a certain Signora Beatrice who very cruelly entreated a gentleman called Benedick, but who was, it may be, heartily in love with him at the same time.

"What do you think Major Melville told me when he called here yesterday, Alicia?" Sir Michael asked, presently.

"I haven't the remotest idea," replied Alicia, rather disdainfully. "Perhaps he told you that we should have another war before long, by Ged, sir; or, perhaps, he told you that we should have a new ministry, by Ged, sir, for that those fellows are getting themselves into a mess, sir; or that those other fellows were reforming this, and cutting down that, and altering the other in the army, until, by Ged, sir, we shall have no army at all, by-and-by—nothing but a pack of boys, sir, crammed up to the eyes with a lot of senseless schoolmasters' rubbish, and dressed in shell-jackets and calico helmets. Yes, sir, they're

fighting in Oudh in calico helmets at this very day, sir."

"You're an impertinent minx, miss," answered the baronet. "Major Melville told me nothing of the kind; but he told me that a very devoted admirer of yours, a certain Sir Harry Towers, has forsaken his place in Hertfordshire, and his hunting stable, and has gone on the Continent for a twelvemonth's tour."

Miss Audley flushed up suddenly at the mention of her old adorer, but recovered herself very quickly.

"He has gone on the Continent, has he?" she said, indifferently. "He told me that he meant to do so—if—if he didn't have everything his own way. Poor fellow! he's a dear, good-hearted, stupid creature, and twenty times better than that peripatetic, patent refrigerator, Mr. Robert Audley."

"I wish, Alicia, you were not so fond of ridiculing Bob," Sir Michael said, gravely. "Bob is a very good fellow, and I'm as fond of him as if he'd been my own son; and—and—I've been

very uncomfortable about him lately. He has changed very much within the last few days, and he has taken all sorts of absurd ideas into his head, and my lady has alarmed me about him. She thinks—"

Lady Audley interrupted her husband with a grave shake of her head.

"It is better not to say too much about it yet awhile," she said; "Alicia knows what I think."

"Yes," rejoined Miss Audley, "my lady thinks that Bob is going mad; but I know better than that. He's not at all the sort of person to go mad. How should such a sluggish ditchpond of an intellect as his ever work itself into a tempest? He may moon about for the rest of his life, perhaps, in a tranquil state of semi-idiotcy, imperfectly comprehending who he is, and where he's going, and what he's doing; but he'll never go mad."

Sir Michael did not reply to this. He had been very much disturbed by his conversation with my lady on the previous evening, and had silently debated the painful question in his mind ever since.

His wife—the woman he best loved and most believed in—had told him with all appearance of regret and agitation, her conviction of his nephew's insanity. He tried in vain to arrive at the conclusion he wished most ardently to attain; he tried in vain to think that my lady was misled by her own fancies, and had no foundation for what she said. But then, again, it suddenly flashed upon him, to think this was to arrive at a worse conclusion; it was to transfer the horrible suspicion from his nephew to his wife. She appeared to be possessed with an actual conviction of Robert's insanity. To imagine her wrong was to imagine some weakness in her own mind. The longer he thought of the subject the more it harassed and perplexed him. It was most certain that the young man had always been eccentric. He was sensible, he was tolerably clever, he was honourable and gentlemanlike in feeling, though perhaps, a little careless in the performance of certain minor social duties; but there were some slight differences, not easily to be defined, that separated him from other men of his age and

position. Then, again, it was equally true that he had very much changed within the period that had succeeded the disappearance of George Talboys. He had grown moody and thoughtful, melancholy and absent-minded. He had held himself aloof from society; had sat for hours without speaking; had talked at other times by fits and starts; and had excited himself unusually in the discussion of subjects which apparently lay far out of the region of his own life and interests. Then there was even another point which seemed to strengthen my lady's case against this unhappy young man. He had been brought up in the frequent society of his cousin, Alicia—his pretty, genial cousin—to whom interest, and one would have thought affection, naturally pointed as his most fitting bride. More than this, the girl had shown him, in the innocent guilelessness of a transparent nature, that on her side at least, affection was not wanting; and yet, in spite of all this, he had held himself aloof, and had allowed other men to propose for her hand, and to be rejected by her, and had still made no sign.

Now love is so very subtle an essence, such an indefinable metaphysical marvel, that its due force, though very cruelly felt by the sufferer himself, is never clearly understood by those who look on at his torments and wonder why he takes the common fever so badly. Sir Michael argued that because Alicia was a pretty girl and an amiable girl it was therefore extraordinary and unnatural in Robert Audley not to have duly fallen in love with her. This baronet—who, close upon his sixtieth birthday, had for the first time encountered that one woman who out of all the women in the world had power to quicken the pulses of his heart—wondered why Robert failed to take the fever from the first breath of contagion that blew towards him. He forgot that there are men who go their ways unscathed amidst legions of lovely and generous women, to succumb at last before some harsh-featured virago, who knows the secret of that only philter which can intoxicate and bewitch him. He forgot that there are certain Jacks who go through life without meeting the Jill appointed for them by Nemesis, and die old

bachelors perhaps, with poor Jill pining an old maid upon the other side of the party-wall. He forgot that love, which is a madness, and a scourge, and a fever, and a delusion, and a snare, is also a mystery, and very imperfectly understood by every one except the individual sufferer who writhes under its tortures. Jones, who is wildly enamoured of Miss Brown, and who lies awake at night until he loathes his comfortable pillow, and tumbles his sheets into two twisted rags of linen in his agonies, as if he were a prisoner and wanted to wind them into impromptu ropes; this same Jones, who thinks Russell-square a magic place because his divinity inhabits it; who thinks the trees in that enclosure and the sky above it greener and bluer than any other trees or sky; and who feels a pang, yes, an actual pang, of mingled hope, and joy, and expectation, and terror when he emerges from Guilford-street, descending from the heights of Islington, into those sacred precincts; this very Jones is hard and callous towards the torments of Smith, who adores Miss Robinson, and cannot imagine what the infatuated fellow can see in the girl.

So it was with Sir Michael Audley. He looked at his nephew as a sample of a very large class of young men, and his daughter as a sample of an equally extensive class of feminine goods; and could not see why the two samples should not make a very respectable match. He ignored all those infinitesimal differences in nature which make the wholesome food of one man the deadly poison of another. How difficult it is to believe sometimes that a man doesn't like such and such a favourite dish. If, at a dinner-party, a meek-looking guest refuses early salmon and cucumber, or green peas in February, we set him down as a poor relation whose instincts warn him off those expensive plates. If an alderman were to declare that he didn't like green fat, he would be looked upon as a social martyr, a Marcus Curtius of the dinner-table, who immolated himself for the benefit of his kind. His fellow aldermen would believe in anything rather than an heretical distaste for the city ambrosia of the soup tureen. But there are people who dislike salmon, and whitebait, and spring ducklings, and all manner

of old-established delicacies, and there are other people who affect eccentric and despicable dishes generally stigmatised as nasty.

Alas, my pretty Alicia, your cousin did not love you! He admired your rosy English face, and had a tender affection for you which might perhaps have expanded by and by into something warm enough for matrimony; that every-day jog-trot species of union which demands no very passionate devotion; but for a sudden check which it had received in Dorsetshire. Yes, Robert Audley's growing affection for his cousin, a plant of very slow growth, I am fain to confess, had been suddenly dwarfed and stunted upon that bitter February day on which he had stood beneath the pine-trees talking to Clara Talboys. Since that day the young man had experienced an unpleasant sensation in thinking of poor Alicia. He looked at her as being in some vague manner an incumbrance upon the freedom of his thoughts; he had a haunting fear that he was in some tacit way pledged to her; that she had a species of claim upon him, which forbade

to him the right of even thinking of another woman. I believe it was the image of Miss Audley presented to him in this light that goaded the young barrister into those outbursts of splenetic rage against the female sex which he was liable to at certain times. He was strictly honourable, so honourable that he would rather have immolated himself upon the altar of truth and Alicia than have done her the remotest wrong, though by so doing he might have secured his own happiness.

"If the poor little girl loves me," he thought, "and if she thinks that I love her, and has been led to think so by any word or act of mine, I am in duty bound to let her think so to the end of time, and to fulfil any tacit promise which I may have unconsciously made. I thought once—I meant once to—to make her an offer by and by, when this horrible mystery about George Talboys should have been cleared up and everything peacefully settled—but now—"

His thoughts would ordinarily wander away at this point of his reflections, carrying him where

he never had intended to go; carrying him back under the pine-trees in Dorsetshire, and setting him once more face to face with the sister of his missing friend, and it was generally a very laborious journey by which he travelled back to the point from which he had strayed. It was so difficult for him to tear himself away from the stunted turf and the pine-trees.

"Poor little girl!" he would think on coming back to Alicia. "How good it is of her to love me; and how grateful I ought to be for her tenderness. How many fellows would think such a generous, loving heart the highest boon that earth could give them. There's Sir Harry Towers stricken with despair at his rejection. He would give me half his estate, all his estate, twice his estate, if he had it, to be in the shoes which I am so anxious to shake off my ungrateful feet. Why don't I love her? Why is it that although I know her to be pretty, and pure, and good, and truthful, I don't love her? Her image never haunts me, except reproachfully. I never see her in my dreams. I never wake up suddenly in the dead

of the night with her eyes shining upon me and her warm breath upon my cheek, or with the fingers of her soft hand clinging to mine. No, I'm not in love with her; I *can't* fall in love with her."

He raged and rebelled against his ingratitude. He tried to argue himself into a passionate attachment for his cousin, but he failed ignominiously; and the more he tried to think of Alicia the more he thought of Clara Talboys. I am speaking now of his feelings in the period that elapsed between his return from Dorsetshire and his visit to Grange Heath.

Sir Michael sat by the library fire after breakfast upon this wretched rainy morning, writing letters and reading the newspapers. Alicia shut herself in her own apartment to read the third volume of a novel. Lady Audley locked the door of the octagon ante-chamber, and roamed up and down the suite of rooms from the bed-room to the boudoir all through that weary morning.

She had locked the door to guard against the chance of any one coming in suddenly and

observing her before she was aware—before she had had sufficient warning to enable her to face their scrutiny. Her pale face seemed to grow paler as the morning advanced. A tiny medicine chest was open upon the dressing-table, and little stoppered bottles of red lavender, sal-volatile, chloroform, chlorodyne, and ether were scattered about. Once my lady paused before this medicine-chest, and took out the remaining bottles, half absently perhaps, until she came to one which was filled with a thick dark liquid, and labelled, "Opium—Poison."

She trifled a long time with this last bottle; holding it up to the light, and even removing the stopper and smelling the sickly liquid. But she put it from her suddenly with a shudder.

"If I could!" she muttered, "if I could only do it! And yet why should I; *now?*"

She clenched her small hands as she uttered the last words, and walked to the window of the dressing-room, which looked straight towards that ivied archway under which any one must come who came from Mount Stanning to the Court.

There were smaller gates in the gardens which led into the meadows behind the Court; but there was no other way of coming from Mount Stanning or Brentwood than by the principal entrance.

The solitary hand of the clock over the archway was midway between one and two when my lady looked at it.

"How slow the time is," she said, wearily; "how slow, how slow! Shall I grow old like this, I wonder, with every minute of my life seeming like an hour?"

She stood for a few minutes watching the archway; but no one passed under it while she looked; and she turned impatiently away from the window to resume her weary wandering about the rooms.

Whatever fire that had been, which had reflected itself vividly in the black sky, no tidings of it had as yet come to Audley Court. The day was miserably wet and windy; altogether the very last day upon which even the most confirmed idler and gossip would care to venture out. It was not a market-day, and there were therefore very few passengers upon the road between Brentwood and

Chelmsford; so that as yet no news of the fire, which had occurred in the dead of the wintry night, had reached the village of Audley, or travelled from the village to the Court.

The girl with the rose-coloured ribbons came to the door of the ante-room to summon her mistress to luncheon; but Lady Audley only opened the door a little way, and intimated her intention of taking no luncheon.

"My head aches terribly, Martin," she said; "I shall go and lie down till dinner time. You may come at five to dress me."

Lady Audley said this with the predetermination of dressing at four, and thus dispensing with the services of her attendant. Amongst all privileged spies, a lady's-maid has the highest privileges. It is she who bathes Lady Theresa's eyes with eau-de-cologne after her ladyship's quarrel with the colonel; it is she who administers sal-volatile to Miss Fanny when Count Beaudesert, of the Blues, has jilted her. She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks

her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. That well-bred attendant knows how to interpret the most obscure diagnoses of all mental diseases that can afflict her mistress; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for—when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist—when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these. She knows when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison's enamel, and far less enduring—when the words that issue from between gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them. When the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters her dressing-room after the night's long revelry, and throws aside her voluminous Burnous and her faded bouquet, and drops her mask; and like another Cinderella loses the glass-slipper, by whose glitter

she has been distinguished, and falls back into her rags and dirt; the lady's-maid is by to see the transformation. The valet who took wages from the prophet of Korazin, must have seen his master sometimes unveiled; and must have laughed in his sleeve at the folly of the monster's worshippers.

Lady Audley had made no *confidante* of her new maid, and on this day of all others she wished to be alone.

She did lie down, she cast herself wearily upon the luxurious sofa in the dressing-room, and buried her face in the down pillows and tried to sleep. Sleep!—she had almost forgotten what it was, that tender restorer of tired nature, it seemed so long now since she had slept. It was only about eight-and-forty hours, perhaps, but it appeared an intolerable time. Her fatigue of the night before, and her unnatural excitement, had worn her out at last. She did fall asleep; she fell into a heavy slumber that was almost like stupor. She had taken a few drops out of the opium bottle in a glass of water before lying down.

The clock over the mantelpiece chimed the quarter before four as she woke suddenly and started up, with the cold perspiration breaking out in icy drops upon her forehead. She had dreamt that every member of the household was clamouring at the door, eager to tell her of a dreadful fire that had happened in the night.

There was no sound but the flapping of the ivy leaves against the glass, the occasional falling of a cinder, and the steady ticking of the clock.

"Perhaps I shall be always dreaming these sort of dreams," my lady thought, "until the terror of them kills me!"

The rain had ceased, and the cold spring sunshine was glittering upon the windows. Lady Audley dressed herself rapidly but carefully. I do not say that even in her supremest hour of misery she still retained her pride in her beauty. It was not so; she looked upon that beauty as a weapon, and she felt that she had now double need to be well armed. She dressed herself in her most gorgeous silk; a voluminous robe of silvery, shimmering blue, that made her look as

if she had been arrayed in moonbeams. She shook out her hair into feathery showers of glittering gold; and with a cloak of white cashmere about her shoulders, went down-stairs into the vestibule.

She opened the door of the library and looked in. Sir Michael Audley was asleep in his easy chair. As my lady softly closed this door Alicia descended the stairs from her own room. The turret door was open, and the sun was shining upon the wet grass-plat in the quadrangle. The firm gravel-walks were already very nearly dry, for the rain had ceased for upwards of two hours

"Will you take a walk with me in the quadrangle?" Lady Audley asked, as her step-daughter approached. The armed neutrality between the two women admitted of any chance civility such as this.

"Yes, if you please, my lady," Alicia answered, rather listlessly. "I have been yawning over a stupid novel all the morning, and shall be very glad of a little fresh air."

Heaven help the novelist whose fiction Miss Audley had been perusing, if he had no better

critics than that young lady. She had read page after page without knowing what she had been reading; and had flung aside the volumes half-a-dozen times to go to the window and watch for that visitor whom she had so confidently expected.

Lady Audley led the way through the low door-way and on to the smooth gravel drive, by which carriages approached the house. She was still very pale, but the brightness of her dress and of her feathery golden ringlets distracted an observer's eyes from her pallid face. All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's. Why had she come out into the chill sunshine of the March afternoon to wander up and down that monotonous pathway with the step-daughter she hated? She came because she was under the dominion of a horrible restlessness, which would not suffer her to remain within the house waiting for certain tidings which she knew must too surely come.

At first she had wished to ward them off—at first she had wished that strange convulsions of nature might arise to hinder their coming—that abnormal winter lightnings might wither and destroy the messenger who carried them—that the ground might tremble and yawn beneath his hastening feet, and that impassable gulfs might separate the spot from which the tidings were to come, and the place to which they were to be carried. She wished that the earth might stand still, and the paralysed elements cease from their natural functions; that the progress of time might stop; that the Day of Judgment might come, and that she might thus be brought before an unearthly tribunal, and so escape the intervening shame and misery of any earthly judgment. In the wild chaos of her brain, every one of these thoughts had held its place, and in her short slumber on the sofa in her dressing-room, she had dreamed all these things and a hundred other things, all bearing upon the same subject. She had dreamed that a brook, a tiny streamlet when she first saw it, flowed across the road between

Mount Stanning and Audley, and gradually swelled into a river, and from a river became an ocean, till the village on the hill receded far away out of sight and only a great waste of waters rolled where it once had been. She dreamt that she saw the messenger; now one person, now another, but never any probable person; hindered by a hundred hindrances; now startling and terrible; now ridiculous and trivial; but never either natural or probable; and going down into the quiet house with the memory of these dreams strong upon her, she had been bewildered by the stillness which had betokened that the tidings had not yet come.

And now her mind underwent a complete change. She no longer wished to delay that dreaded intelligence. She wished the agony, whatever it was to be, over and done with, the pain suffered, and the release attained. It seemed to her as if the intolerable day would never come to an end, as if her mad wishes had been granted, and the progress of time had actually stopped.

"What a long day it has been!" exclaimed Alicia, as if taking up the burden of my lady's thoughts; "nothing but drizzle and mist and wind! And now that it's too late for anybody to go out, it must needs be fine," the young lady added, with an evident sense of injury.

Lady Audley did not answer. She was looking at the stupid one-handed clock; and waiting for the news which must come sooner or later; which could not surely fail to come very speedily.

"They have been afraid to come and tell him," she thought; "they have been afraid to break the news to Sir Michael. Who will come to tell it, at last, I wonder? The rector of Mount Stanning, perhaps; or the doctor; some important person, at least."

If she could have gone out into the leafless avenues, or on to the high road beyond them; if she could have gone so far as that hill upon which she had so lately parted with Phœbe, she would have gladly done so. She would rather have suffered anything than that slow suspense, that corroding anxiety, that metaphysical dry-rot in which heart

and mind seemed to decay under an insufferable torture. She tried to talk; and by a painful effort contrived now and then to utter some commonplace remark. Under any ordinary circumstances her companion would have noticed her embarrassment; but Miss Audley, happening to be very much absorbed by her own vexations, was quite as well inclined to be silent as my lady herself. The monotonous walk up and down the gravelled pathway suited Alicia's humour. I think that she even took a malicious pleasure in the idea that she was very likely catching cold; and that her cousin Robert was answerable for her danger. If she could have brought upon herself inflammation of the lungs, or ruptured blood-vessels, by that exposure to the chill March atmosphere, I think she would have felt a gloomy satisfaction in her sufferings.

"Perhaps Robert might care for me, if I had inflammation of the lungs," she thought. "He couldn't insult me by calling me a Bouncer then. Bouncers don't have inflammation of the lungs."

I believe she drew a picture of herself in the last stage of consumption, propped up by pillows in a great easy-chair, looking out of a window in the afternoon sunshine, with medicine bottles, a bunch of grapes and a Bible upon a table by her side; and with Robert, all contrition and tenderness, summoned to receive her farewell blessing. She preached a whole chapter to him in that parting benediction, talking a great deal longer than was in keeping with her prostrate state, and very much enjoying her dismal castle in the air. Employed in this sentimental manner, Miss Audley took very little notice of her step-mother, and the one hand of the blundering clock had slipped to six by the time Robert had been blessed and dismissed.

"Good gracious me," she cried, suddenly—"six o'clock, and I'm not dressed."

The half-hour bell rang in a cupola upon the roof while Alicia was speaking.

"I must go in, my lady," she said, "Won't you come?"

"Presently," answered Lady Audley. "I'm dressed, you see."

Alicia ran off, but Sir Michael's wife still lingered in the quadrangle; still waited for those tidings which were so long coming.

It was nearly dark. The blue mists of evening had slowly risen from the ground. The flat meadows were filled with a grey vapour, and a stranger might have fancied Audley Court a castle on the margin of a sea. Under the archway the shadows of fast-coming night lurked darkly; like traitors waiting for an opportunity to glide stealthily into the quadrangle. Through the archway a patch of cold blue sky glimmered faintly, streaked by one line of lurid crimson, and lighted by the dim glitter of one wintry-looking star. Not a creature was stirring in the quadrangle but the restless woman, who paced up and down the straight pathways, listening for a footstep, whose coming was to strike terror to her soul. She heard it at last!—a footstep in the avenue upon the other side of the archway. But was it *the* footstep? Her sense of hearing, made unnaturally acute by excitement, told her that it was a man's footstep—told

even more, that it was the tread of a gentleman; no slouching, lumbering pedestrian in hobnailed boots; but a gentleman who walked firmly and well.

Every sound fell like a lump of ice upon my lady's heart. She could not wait, she could not contain herself; she lost all self-control, all power of endurance, all capability of self-restraint; and she rushed towards the archway.

She paused beneath its shadow, for the stranger was close upon her. She saw him: O God! she saw him, in that dim evening light. Her brain reeled; her heart stopped beating. She uttered no cry of surprise, no exclamation of terror, but staggered backwards and clung for support to the ivied buttress of the archway. With her slender figure crouched into the angle formed by this buttress and the wall which it supported, she stood staring at the new-comer.

As he approached her more closely her knees sank under her, and she dropped to the ground; not fainting, or in any manner unconscious; but sinking into a crouching attitude, and still crushed

into the angle of the wall; as if she would have made a tomb for herself in the shadow of that sheltering brickwork.

"My lady!"

The speaker was Robert Audley. He whose bed-room door she had double-locked seventeen hours before at the Castle Inn.

"What is the matter with you?" he said, in a strange, constrained manner. "Get up, and let me take you in-doors."

He assisted her to rise; and she obeyed him, very submissively. He took her arm in his strong hand and led her across the quadrangle and into the lamp-lit hall. She shivered more violently than he had ever seen any woman shiver before; but she made no attempt at resistance to his will.

CHAPTER III.

MY LADY TELLS THE TRUTH.

"Is there any room in which I can talk to you alone?" Robert Audley asked, as he looked dubiously round the hall.

My lady only bowed her head in answer. She pushed open the door of the library, which had been left ajar. Sir Michael had gone to his dressing-room to prepare for dinner after a day of lazy enjoyment; perfectly legitimate for an invalid. The apartment was quite empty, and only lighted by the blaze of the fire, as it had been upon the previous evening.

Lady Audley entered this room, followed by Robert, who closed the door behind him. The wretched, shivering woman went to the fire-place and knelt down before the blaze, as if any natural warmth could have power to check that unnatural chill. The young man followed her, and stood

beside her upon the hearth, with his arm resting upon the chimney-piece.

"Lady Audley," he said, in a voice whose icy sternness held out no hope of any tenderness or compassion, "I spoke to you last night very plainly; but you refused to listen to me. To-night I must speak to you still more plainly; and you must no longer refuse to listen to me."

My lady, crouching before the fire with her face hidden in her hands, uttered a low sobbing sound which was almost a moan, but made no other answer.

"There was a fire last night at Mount Stanning, Lady Audley," the pitiless voice proceeded; "the Castle Inn, the house in which I slept, was burned to the ground. Do you know how I escaped perishing in that destruction?"

"No."

"I escaped by a most providential circumstance, which seems a very simple one. I did not sleep in the room which had been prepared for me. The place seemed wretchedly damp and chilly; the chimney smoked abominably when an attempt

was made at lighting a fire; and I persuaded the servant to make me up a bed upon the sofa in the small ground-floor sitting-room which I had occupied during the evening."

He paused for a moment, watching the crouching figure. The only change in my lady's attitude was that her head had fallen a little lower.

"Shall I tell you by whose agency the destruction of the Castle Inn was brought about, my lady?"

There was no answer.

"Shall I tell you?"

Still the same obstinate silence.

"My Lady Audley," cried Robert, suddenly, "*you* were the incendiary. It was you whose murderous hand kindled those flames. It was you who thought by that thrice-horrible deed to rid yourself of me, your enemy and denouncer. What was it to you that other lives might be sacrified? If by a second massacre of Saint Bartholomew you could have ridded yourself of *me*, you would have freely sacrificed an army of victims. The day is past for tenderness and

mercy. For you I can no longer know pity or compunction. So far as by sparing your shame I can spare others who must suffer by your shame, I will be merciful; but no further. If there were any secret tribunal before which you might be made to answer for your crimes, I would have little scruple in being your accuser: but I would spare that generous and high-born gentleman upon whose noble name your infamy would be reflected."

His voice softened as he made this allusion, and for a moment he broke down, but he recovered himself by an effort and continued—

"No life was lost in the fire of last night. I slept lightly, my lady, for my mind was troubled, as it has been for a long time, by the misery which I knew was lowering upon this house. It was I who discovered the breaking out of the fire in time to give the alarm and to save the servant girl and the poor drunken wretch, who was very much burnt in spite of my efforts, and who now lies in a precarious state at his mother's cottage. It was from him and from his wife that I learned

who had visited the Castle Inn in the dead of the night. The woman was almost distracted when she saw me, and from her I discovered the particulars of last night. Heaven knows what other secrets of yours she may hold, my lady, or how easily they might be extorted from her if I wanted her aid, which I do not. My path lies very straight before me. I have sworn to bring the murderer of George Talboys to justice: and I will keep my oath. I say that it was by your agency my friend met with his death. If I have wondered sometimes, as it was only natural I should, whether I was not the victim of some horrible hallucination; whether such an alternative was not more probable than that a young and lovely woman should be capable of so foul and treacherous a murder, all wonder is past. After last night's deed of horror, there is no crime you could commit, however vast and unnatural, which could make me wonder. Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I look

upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle. But you shall no longer pollute this place by your presence. Unless you will confess what you are, and who you are, in the presence of the man you have deceived so long; and accept from him and from me such mercy as we may be inclined to extend to you; I will gather together the witnesses who shall swear to your identity, and at peril of any shame to myself and those I love, I will bring upon you the punishment of your crime."

The woman rose suddenly and stood before him erect and resolute; with her hair dashed away from her face and her eyes glittering.

"Bring Sir Michael!" she cried; "bring him here, and I will confess anything—everything! What do I care? God knows I have struggled hard enough against you, and fought the battle patiently enough; but you have conquered, Mr. Robert Audley. It is a great triumph, is it not? a wonderful victory! You have used your cool, calculating, frigid, luminous intellect to a noble purpose. You have conquered—a MADWOMAN!"

"A madwoman!" cried Mr. Audley.

"Yes, a madwoman. When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me, and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and *I was mad!* Bring Sir Michael; and bring him quickly. If he is to be told one thing, let him be told everything; let him hear the secret of my life!"

Robert Audley left the room to look for his uncle. He went in search of that honoured kinsman with God knows how heavy a weight of anguish at his heart, for he knew he was about to shatter the day-dream of his uncle's life; and he knew that our dreams are none the less terrible to lose, because they have never been the realities for which we have mistaken them. But even in

the midst of his sorrow for Sir Michael, he could not help wondering at my lady's last words—"the secret of my life." He remembered those lines in the letter written by Helen Talboys upon the eve of her flight from Wildernsea, which had so puzzled him. He remembered those appealing sentences—"You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* of my life."

He met Sir Michael in the hall. He made no attempt to prepare the way for the terrible revelation which the baronet was to hear. He only drew him into the fire-lit library, and there for the first time addressed him quietly thus:—

"Lady Audley has a confession to make to you, sir—a confession which I know will be a most cruel surprise, a most bitter grief. But it is necessary for your present honour, and for your future peace, that you should hear it. She has deceived you, I regret to say, most basely; but it is only right you should hear from her own lips any excuses which she may have to offer for her wickedness. May God soften this blow for you,"

sobbed the young man, suddenly breaking down; "I cannot!"

Sir Michael lifted his hand as if he would have commanded his nephew to be silent; but that imperious hand dropped feeble and impotent at his side. He stood in the centre of the fire-lit room, rigid and immovable.

"Lucy!" he cried, in a voice whose anguish struck like a blow upon the jarred nerves of those who heard it, as the cry of a wounded animal pains the listener—"Lucy! tell me that this man is a madman! tell me so, my love, or I shall kill him!"

There was a sudden fury in his voice as he turned upon Robert, as if he could indeed have felled his wife's accuser to the earth with the strength of his uplifted arm.

But my lady fell upon her knees at his feet; interposing herself between the baronet and his nephew, who stood leaning upon the back of an easy chair, with his face hidden by his hand.

"He has told you the truth," said my lady,

"and he is not mad! I have sent for you that I may confess everything to you. I should be sorry for you if I could; for you have been very, very good to me; much better to me than I ever deserved; but I can't, I can't—I can feel nothing but my own misery. I told you long ago that I was selfish; I am selfish still—more selfish than ever in my misery. Happy, prosperous people may feel for others. I laugh at other people's sufferings; they seem so small compared to my own."

When first my lady had fallen on her knees, Sir Michael had attempted to raise her, and had remonstrated with her; but as she spoke he dropped into a chair close to the spot upon which she knelt, and with his hands clasped together, and with his head bent to catch every syllable of those horrible words, he listened as if his whole being had been resolved into that one sense of hearing.

"I must tell you the story of my life; in order to tell you why I have become the miserable wretch who has no better hope than to be allowed

to run away and hide in some desolate corner of the earth. I must tell you the story of my life,' repeated my lady, "but you need not fear that I shall dwell long upon it. It has not been so pleasant to me that I should wish to remember it. When I was a very little child I remember asking a question which it was natural enough that I should ask, God help me! I asked where my mother was. I had a faint remembrance of a face, like what my own is now, looking at me when I was very little better than a baby; but I had missed the face suddenly, and had never seen it since. They told me that my mother was away. I was not happy, for the woman who had charge of me was a disagreeable woman, and the place in which we lived was a lonely place, a village upon the Hampshire coast, about seven miles from Portsmouth. My father, who was in the navy, only came now and then to see me; and I was left almost entirely to the charge of this woman, who was irregularly paid; and who vented her rage upon me when my father was behind-hand in remitting her money. So you see that

at a very early age I found out what it was to be poor.

"Perhaps it was more from being discontented with my dreary life than from any wonderful impulse of affection, that I asked very often the same question about my mother. I always received the same answer—she was away. When I asked where, I was told that that was a secret. When I grew old enough to understand the meaning of the word death, I asked if my mother was dead, and I was told—'No, she was not dead; she was ill, and she was away.' I asked how long she had been ill, and I was told that she had been so some years; ever since I was a baby.

"At last the secret came out. I worried my foster-mother with the old question one day when the remittances had fallen very much in arrear, and her temper had been unusually tried. She flew into a passion; and told me that my mother was a madwoman; and that she was in a madhouse forty miles away. She had scarcely said this when she repented, and told me that it was

not the truth, and that I was not to believe it, or to say that she had told me such a thing. I discovered afterwards that my father had made her promise most solemnly never to tell me the secret of my mother's fate.

"I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother's madness. It haunted me by day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs. I had exaggerated ideas of the horror of her situation. I had no knowledge of the different degrees of madness; and the image that haunted me was that of a distraught and violent creature, who would fall upon me and kill me if I came within her reach. This idea grew upon me until I used to awake in the dead of the night, screaming aloud in an agony of terror, from a dream in which I had felt my mother's icy grasp upon my throat, and heard her ravings in my ear.

"When I was ten years old my father came to pay up the arrears due to my protectress, and to

take me to school. He had left me in Hampshire longer than he had intended, from his inability to pay this money. So there again I felt the bitterness of poverty, and ran the risk of growing up an ignorant creature amongst coarse rustic children, because my father was poor."

My lady paused for a moment, but only to take breath, for she had spoken rapidly, as if eager to tell this hated story, and to have done with it. She was still on her knees, but Sir Michael made no effort to raise her.

He sat silent and immovable. What was this story that he was listening to? Whose was it, and to what was it to lead? It could not be his wife's; he had heard her simple account of her youth, and had believed it as he had believed in the Gospel. She had told him a very brief story of an early orphanage, and a long quiet, colourless youth spent in the conventual seclusion of an English boarding-school.

"My father came at last, and I told him what I had discovered. He was very much affected when I spoke of my mother. He was not what

the world generally calls a good man, but I learned afterwards that he had loved his wife very dearly; and that he would have willingly sacrificed his life to her, and constituted himself her guardian, had he not been compelled to earn the daily bread of the madwoman and her child by the exercise of his profession. So here again I beheld what a bitter thing it is to be poor. My mother, who might have been tended by a devoted husband, was given over to the care of hired nurses.

"Before my father sent me to school at Torquay, he took me to see my mother. This visit served at least to dispel the idea which had so often terrified me. I saw no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter.

"But she didn't know us. She would have spoken in the same manner to any stranger who

had entered the gates of the garden about her prison-house. Her madness was an hereditary disease transmitted to her from her mother, who had died mad. She, my mother, had been, or had appeared sane up to the hour of my birth; but, from that hour her intellect had decayed, until she had become what I saw her.

"I went away with the knowledge of this, and with the knowledge that the only inheritance I had to expect from my mother was—insanity!

"I went away with this knowledge in my mind, and with something more—a secret to keep. I was only a child of ten years old; but I felt all the weight of that burden. I was to keep the secret of my mother's madness; for it was a secret that might affect me injuriously in after-life. I was to remember this.

"I did remember this; and it was, perhaps, this that made me selfish and heartless; for I suppose I am heartless. As I grew older I was told that I was pretty — beautiful — lovely — bewitching. I heard all these things at first indifferently; but by-and-by I listened to them

greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world's great lottery than my companions. I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them.

"I left school before I was seventeen years of age with this thought in my mind; and I went to live at the other extremity of England with my father, who had retired upon his half-pay, and had established himself at Wildernsea, with the idea that the place was cheap and select.

"The place was indeed select. I had not been there a month before I discovered that even the prettiest girl might wait a long time for a rich husband. I wish to hurry over this part of my life: I daresay I was very despicable. You and your nephew, Sir Michael, have been rich all your lives, and can very well afford to despise me; but I knew how far poverty can affect a life, and I

looked forward with a sick terror to a life so affected. At last the rich suitor—the wandering prince came."

She paused for a moment, and shuddered convulsively. It was impossible to see any of the changes of her countenance, for her face was obstinately bent towards the floor. Throughout her long confession she never lifted it; throughout her long confession her voice was never broken by a tear. What she had to tell she told in a cold, hard tone; very much the tone in which some criminal, dogged and sullen to the last, might have confessed to a gaol chaplain.

"The wandering prince came," she repeated; "he was called George Talboys."

For the first time since his wife's confession had begun, Sir Michael Audley started. He began to understand it all now. A crowd of unheeded words and forgotten circumstances that had seemed too insignificant for remark or recollection, flashed back upon him as vividly as if they had been the leading incidents of his past life.

"Mr. George Talboys was a cornet in a dra-

goon regiment. He was the only son of a rich country gentleman. He fell in love with me, and married me three months after my seventeenth birthday. I think I loved him as much as it was in my power to love anybody; not more than I have loved you, Sir Michael; not so much; for when you married me you elevated me to a position that he could never have given me."

The dream was broken. Sir Michael Audley remembered that summer's evening, nearly two years ago, when he had first declared his love for Mr. Dawson's governess; he remembered the sick, half-shuddering sensation of regret and disappointment that had come over him then; and he felt as if it had in some manner dimly foreshadowed the agony of to-night.

But I do not believe that even in his misery he felt that entire and unmitigated surprise, that utter revulsion of feeling that is felt when a good woman wanders away from herself, and becomes the lost creature whom her husband is bound in honour to abjure. I do not believe that Sir Michael Audley had ever *really* believed in his

wife. He had loved her and admired her; he had been bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms; but that sense of something wanting, that vague feeling of loss and disappointment which had come upon him on the summer's night of his betrothal, had been with him more or less distinctly ever since. I cannot believe that an honest man, however pure and single may be his mind, however simply trustful his nature, is ever really deceived by falsehood. There is beneath the voluntary confidence an involuntary distrust; not to be conquered by any effort of the will.

"We were married," my lady continued, "and I loved him very well, quite well enough to be happy with him as long as his money lasted, and while we were on the Continent, travelling in the best style and always staying at the best hotels. But when we came back to Wildernsea and lived with papa, and all the money was gone, and George grew gloomy and wretched, and was always thinking of his troubles, and appeared to neglect me, I was very unhappy; and it seemed as

if this fine marriage had only given me a twelvemonth's gaiety and extravagance after all. I begged George to appeal to his father; but he refused. I persuaded him to try and get employment; and he failed. My baby was born, and the crisis which had been fatal to my mother arose for me. I escaped; but I was more irritable perhaps after my recovery; less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world; more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect. I did complain one day, loudly and bitterly. I upbraided George Talboys for his cruelty in having allied a helpless girl to poverty and misery; and he flew into a passion with me and ran out of the house. When I awoke the next morning I found a letter lying on the table by my bed, telling me that he was going to the Antipodes to seek his fortune, and that he would never see me again until he was a rich man.

"I looked upon this as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly—I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support.

I had to work hard for my living, and in every hour of labour—and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of a governess?—I recognised a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity. People pitied me; and I hated them for their pity. I did not love the child; for he had been left a burden upon my hands. The hereditary taint that was in my blood had never until this time showed itself by any one sign or token; but at this time I became subject to fits of violence and despair. At this time I think my mind first lost its balance, and for the first time I crossed that invisible line which separates reason from madness. I have seen my father's eyes fixed upon me in horror and alarm. I have known him soothe me as only mad people and children are soothed, and I have chafed against his petty devices, I have resented even his indulgence.

"At last these fits of desperation resolved

themselves into a desperate purpose. I determined to run away from this wretched home which my slavery supported. I determined to desert this father who had more fear of me than love for me. I determined to go to London, and lose myself in that great chaos of humanity.

"I had seen an advertisement in the *Times* while I was at Wildernsea, and I presented myself to Mrs. Vincent, the advertiser, under a feigned name. She accepted me, waiving all question as to my antecedents. You know the rest. I came here, and you made me an offer, the acceptance of which would lift me at once into the sphere to which my ambition had pointed ever since I was a school-girl, and heard for the first time that I was pretty.

"Three years had passed, and I had received no token of my husband's existence; for, I argued, that if he had returned to England, he would have succeeded in finding me under any name and in any place. I knew the energy of his character well enough to know this.

"I said, 'I have a right to think that he is

dead, or that he wishes me to believe him dead, and his shadow shall not stand between me and prosperity.' I said this, and I became your wife, Sir Michael, with every resolution to be as good a wife as it was in my nature to be. The common temptations that assail and shipwreck some women had no terror for me. I would have been your true and pure wife to the end of time, though I had been surrounded by a legion of tempters. The mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness; and here at least extremes met, and the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy.

"I was very happy in the first triumph and grandeur of my new position, very grateful to the hand that had lifted me to it. In the sunshine of my own happiness I felt, for the first time in my life, for the miseries of others. I had been poor myself, and I was now rich, and could afford to pity and relieve the poverty of my neighbours. I took pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence. I found out my father's address and sent him large

sums of money, anonymously, for I did not wish him to discover what had become of me. I availed myself to the full of the privilege your generosity afforded me. I dispensed happiness on every side. I saw myself loved as well as admired; and I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so.

"I believe that at this time my mind regained its just balance. I had watched myself very closely since leaving Wildernsea; I had held a check upon myself. I had often wondered, while sitting in the surgeon's quiet family circle, whether any suspicion of that invisible hereditary taint had ever occurred to Mr. Dawson.

"Fate would not suffer me to be good. My destiny compelled me to be a wretch. Within a month of my marriage, I read in one of the Essex papers of the return of a certain Mr. Talboys, a fortunate gold-seeker, from Australia. The ship had sailed at the time I read the paragraph. What was to be done?

"I said just now that I knew the energy of

George's character. I knew that the man who had gone to the antipodes, and won a fortune for his wife, would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to find her. It was hopeless to think of hiding myself from him.

"Unless he could be induced to believe that I was dead, he would never cease in his search for me.

"My brain was dazed as I thought of my peril. Again the balance trembled; again the invisible boundary was passed; again I was mad.

"I went down to Southampton and found my father, who was living there with my child. You remember how Mrs. Vincent's name was used as an excuse for this hurried journey, and how it was contrived that I should go with no other escort than Phœbe Marks, whom I left at the hotel while I went to my father's house.

"I confided to my father the whole secret of my peril. He was not very much shocked at what I had done, for poverty had perhaps blunted his sense of honour and principle. He was not very

much shocked; but he was frightened; and he promised to do all in his power to assist me in my horrible emergency.

"He had received a letter addressed to me at Wildernsea, by George, and forwarded from there to my father. This letter had been written within a few days of the sailing of the *Argus*, and it announced the probable date of the ship's arrival at Liverpool. This letter gave us, therefore, data upon which to act.

"We decided at once upon the first step. This was that on the date of the probable arrival of the *Argus*, or a few days later, an advertisement of my death should be inserted in the *Times*.

"But almost immediately after deciding upon this, we saw that there were fearful difficulties in the carrying out of such a simple plan. The date of the death, and the place in which I died, must be announced, as well as the death itself. George would immediately hurry to that place, however distant it might be, however comparatively inaccessible, and the shallow falsehood would be discovered.

"I knew enough of his sanguine temperament, his courage and determination, his readiness to hope against hope, to know that unless he saw the grave in which I was buried, and the register of my death, he would never believe that I was lost to him.

"My father was utterly dumfounded and helpless. He could only shed childish tears of despair and terror. He was of no use to me in this crisis.

"I was hopeless of any issue out of my difficulty. I began to think that I must trust to the chapter of accidents; and hope that amongst other obscure corners of the earth, Audley Court might remain undreamt-of by my husband.

"I sat with my father, drinking tea with him in his miserable hovel, and playing with the child, who was pleased with my dress and jewels, but quite unconscious that I was anything but a stranger to him. I had the boy in my arms, when a woman who attended him came to fetch him that she might make him more fit to be seen by the lady, as she said.

"I was anxious to know how the boy was treated, and I detained this woman in conversation with me, while my father dozed over the tea-table.

"She was a pale-faced, sandy-haired woman, of about five-and-forty; and she seemed very glad to get the chance of talking to me as long as I pleased to allow her. She soon left off talking of the boy, however, to tell me her own troubles. She was in very great trouble, she told me. Her eldest daughter had been obliged to leave her situation from ill-health; in fact, the doctor said the girl was in a decline; and it was a hard thing for a poor widow who had seen better days to have a sick daughter to support, as well as a family of young children.

"I let the woman run on for a long time in this manner, telling me the girl's ailments, and the girl's age, and the girl's doctor's stuff, and piety, and sufferings, and a great deal more. But I neither listened to her nor heeded her. I heard her, but only in a far-away manner, as I heard the traffic in the street, or the ripple of

the stream at the bottom of it. What were this woman's troubles to me? I had miseries of my own; and worse miseries than *her* coarse nature could ever have to endure. These sort of people always had sick husbands or sick children, and expected to be helped in their illnesses by the rich. It was nothing out of the common. I was thinking this; and I was just going to dismiss the woman with a sovereign for her sick daughter; when an idea flashed upon me with such painful suddenness that it sent the blood surging up to my brain, and set my heart beating, as it only beats when I am mad.

"I asked the woman her name. She was a Mrs. Plowson, and she kept a small general shop, she said, and only ran in now and then to look after Georgey, and to see that the little maid-of-all-work took care of him. Her daughter's name was Matilda. I asked her several questions about this girl Matilda, and I ascertained that she was four-and-twenty, that she had always been consumptive, and that she was now, as the doctor said, going off in a rapid decline. He had de-

clared that she could not last much more than a fortnight.

"It was in three weeks that the ship that carried George Talboys was expected to anchor in the Mersey.

"I need not dwell much upon this business. I visited the sick girl. She was fair and slender. Her description, carelessly given, might tally nearly enough with my own; though she bore no shadow of resemblance to me, except in these two particulars. I was received by the girl as a rich lady who wished to do her service. I bought the mother, who was poor and greedy, and who for a gift of money, more money than she had ever before received, consented to submit to anything I wished. Upon the second day after my introduction to this Mrs. Plowson, my father went over to Ventnor, and hired lodgings for his invalid daughter and her little boy. Early the next morning he carried over the dying girl and Georgey, who had been bribed to call her 'mamma.' She entered the house as Mrs. Talboys; she was attended by a Ventnor medical

man as Mrs. Talboys; she died, and her death and burial were registered in that name. The advertisement was inserted in the *Times*, and upon the second day after its insertion George Talboys visited Ventnor, and ordered the tombstone which at this hour records the death of his wife, Helen Talboys."

Sir Michael Audley rose slowly, and with stiff, constrained action, as if every physical sense had been benumbed by that one sense of misery.

"I cannot hear any more," he said, in a hoarse whisper; "if there is anything more to be told, I cannot hear it. Robert, it is you who have brought about this discovery, as I understand. I want to know nothing more. Will you take upon yourself the duty of providing for the safety and comfort of this lady, whom I have thought my wife? I need not ask you to remember in all you do, that I have loved her very dearly and truly. I cannot say farewell to her. I will not say it until I can think of her without bitterness —until I can pity her; as I now pray that God may pity her this night."

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Sir Michael walked slowly from the room. He did not trust himself to look at that crouching figure. He did not wish to see the creature whom he had cherished. He went straight to his dressing-room, rang for his valet, and ordered him to pack a portmanteau, and make all necessary arrangements for accompanying his master by the last up-train.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUSH THAT SUCCEEDS THE TEMPEST.

Robert Audley followed his uncle into the vestibule after Sir Michael had spoken those few quiet words which sounded the death-knell of his hope and love. Heaven knows how much the young man had feared the coming of this day. It had come; and though there had been no great outburst of despair, no whirlwind of stormy grief, no loud tempest of anguish and tears, Robert took no comforting thought from the unnatural stillness. He knew enough to know that Sir Michael Audley went away with the barbed arrow, which his nephew's hand had sent home to its aim, rankling in his tortured heart; he knew that this strange and icy calm was the first numbness of a heart stricken by a grief so unexpected as for a time to be rendered almost incomprehensible by a blank stupor of astonish-

ment. He knew that when this dull quiet had passed away, when little by little, and one by one, each horrible feature of the sufferer's sorrow became first dimly apparent and then terribly familiar to him, the storm would burst in fata fury, and tempests of tears and cruel thunder-claps of agony would rend that generous heart.

Robert had heard of cases in which men of his uncle's age had borne some great grief, as Sir Michael had borne this, with a strange quiet; and had gone away from those who would have comforted them, and whose anxieties have been relieved by this patient stillness, to fall down upon the ground and die under the blow which at first had only stunned them. He remembered cases in which paralysis and apoplexy had stricken men as strong as his uncle in the first hour of the horrible affliction; and he lingered in the lamp-lit vestibule, wondering whether it was not his duty to be with Sir Michael—to be near him, in case of any emergency, and to accompany him wherever he went.

Yet, would it be wise to force himself upon

that grey-headed sufferer in this cruel hour, in which he had been awakened from the one delusion of a blameless life to discover that he had been the dupe of a false face, and the fool of a nature which was too coldly mercenary, too cruelly heartless, to be sensible of its own infamy?

"No," thought Robert Audley, "I will not intrude upon the anguish of this wounded heart. There is humiliation mingled with this bitter grief. It is better he should fight the battle alone. I have done what I believe to have been my solemn duty, yet I should scarcely wonder if I had rendered myself for ever hateful to him. It is better he should fight the battle alone. I can do nothing to make the strife less terrible. Better that it should be fought alone."

While the young man stood with his hand upon the library door, still half doubtful whether he should follow his uncle or re-enter the room in which he had left that more wretched creature, whom it had been his business to unmask, Alicia Audley opened the dining-room door, and re-

vealed to him the old-fashioned oak-panelled apartment, the long table covered with snowy damask, and bright with a cheerful glitter of glass and silver.

"*Is* papa coming to dinner?" asked Miss Audley. "I'm *so* hungry; and poor Tomlins has sent up three times to say the fish will be spoiled. It must be reduced to a species of isinglass soup by this time, I should think," added the young lady, as she came out into the vestibule with the *Times* newspaper in her hand.

She had been sitting by the fire reading the paper, and waiting for her seniors to join her at the dinner-table.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Robert Audley," she remarked, indifferently. "You dine with us, of course. Pray go and find papa. It must be nearly eight o'clock, and we are supposed to dine at six."

Mr. Audley answered his cousin rather sternly. Her frivolous manner jarred upon him, and he forgot in his irrational displeasure that Miss Audley had known nothing of the terrible drama

which had been so long enacting under her very nose.

"Your papa has just endured a very great grief, Alicia," the young man said, gravely.

The girl's arch, laughing face changed in a moment to a tenderly earnest look of sorrow and anxiety. Alicia Audley loved her father very dearly.

"A grief!" she exclaimed; "papa grieved? Oh! Robert, what has happened?"

"I can tell you nothing yet, Alicia," Robert answered, in a low voice.

He took his cousin by the wrist, and drew her into the dining-room as he spoke. He closed the door carefully behind him before he continued:—

"Alicia, can I trust you?" he asked, earnestly.

"Trust me to do what?"

"To be a comfort and a friend to your poor father under a very heavy affliction."

"Yes!" cried Alicia, passionately. "How can you ask me such a question? Do you think there is anything I would not do to lighten any

sorrow of my father's? Do you think there is anything I would not suffer if my suffering could lighten his?"

The rushing tears rose to Miss Audley's bright grey eyes as she spoke.

"Oh, Robert! Robert! could you think so badly of me as to think that I would not try to be a comfort to my father in his grief?" she said, reproachfully.

"No, no, my dear," answered the young man, quietly; "I never doubted your affection, I only doubted your discretion. May I rely upon that?"

"You may, Robert," said Alicia, resolutely.

"Very well, then, my dear girl, I will trust you. Your father is going to leave the Court, for a time at least. The grief which he has just endured—a sudden and an unlooked-for sorrow, remember—has no doubt made this place hateful to him. He is going away; but he must not go alone, must he, Alicia?"

"Alone? no! no! But I suppose my lady—"

"Lady Audley will not go with him," said

Robert, gravely; "he is about to separate himself from her."

"For a time?"

"No; for ever."

"Separate himself from her for ever!" exclaimed Alicia. "Then this grief—"

"Is connected with Lady Audley. Lady Audley is the cause of your father's sorrow."

Alicia's face, which had been pale before, flushed crimson. Sorrow, of which my lady was the cause—a sorrow which was to separate Sir Michae for ever from his young wife! There had been no quarrel between them—there had never been anything but harmony and sunshine between Lucy Audley and her generous husband. This sorrow must surely then have arisen from some sudden discovery; it was, no doubt, a sorrow associated with disgrace. Robert Audley understood the meaning of that vivid blush.

"You will offer to accompany your father wherever he may choose to go, Alicia," he said. "You are his natural comforter at such a time as this, but you will best befriend him in this hour

of trial by avoiding all intrusion upon his grief. Your very ignorance of the particulars of that grief will be a security for your discretion. Say nothing to your father that you might not have said to him two years ago, before he married a second wife. Try and be to him what you were before the woman in yonder room came between you and your father's love."

"I will," murmured Alicia, "I will."

"You will naturally avoid all mention of Lady Audley's name. If your father is often silent, be patient; if it sometimes seems to you that the shadow of this great sorrow will never pass away from his life, be patient still; and remember that there can be no better hope of a cure for his grief than the hope that his daughter's devotion may lead him to remember there is one woman upon this earth who will love him truly and purely until the last."

"Yes, yes, Robert, dear cousin, I will remember."

Mr. Audley, for the first time since he had

been a schoolboy, took his cousin in his arms and kissed her broad forehead.

"My dear Alicia," he said, "do this, and you will make me happy. I have been in some measure the means of bringing this sorrow upon your father. Let me hope that it is not an enduring one. Try and restore my uncle to happiness, Alicia, and I will love you more dearly than brother ever loved a noble-hearted sister; and a brotherly affection may be worth having, perhaps, after all, my dear, though it is very different to poor Sir Harry's enthusiastic worship."

Alicia's head was bent and her face hidden from her cousin while he spoke; but she lifted her head when he had finished, and looked him full in the face with a smile that was only the brighter for her eyes being filled with tears.

"You are a good fellow, Bob," she said: "and I've been very foolish and wicked to feel angry with you, because——"

The young lady stopped suddenly.

"Because what, my dear?" asked Mr. Audley.

"Because I'm silly, cousin Robert," Alicia said

quickly; "never mind that, Bob; I'll do all you wish, and it shall not be my fault if my dearest father doesn't forget his troubles before long. I'd go to the end of the world with him, poor darling, if I thought there was any comfort to be found for him in the journey. I'll go and get ready directly. Do you think papa will go to-night?"

"Yes, my dear; I don't think Sir Michael will rest another night under this roof, yet awhile."

"The mail goes at twenty minutes past nine," said Alicia; "we must leave the house in an hour if we are to travel by it. I shall see you again before we go, Robert."

"Yes, dear."

Miss Audley ran off to her room to summon her maid, and make all necessary preparations for the sudden journey, of whose ultimate destination she was as yet quite ignorant.

She went heart and soul into the carrying out of the duty which Robert had dictated to her. She assisted in the packing of her portmanteaus, and hopelessly bewildered her maid by stuffing silk dresses into her bonnet boxes, and satin shoes

into her dressing-case. She roamed about her rooms gathering together drawing materials, music-books, needlework, hair-brushes, jewellery, and perfume-bottles, very much as she might have done had she been about to sail for some savage country devoid of all civilised resources. She was thinking all the time of her father's unknown grief; and perhaps a little of the serious face and earnest voice which had that night revealed her cousin Robert to her in a new character.

Mr. Audley went up-stairs after his cousin, and found his way to Sir Michael's dressing-room. He knocked at the door and listened, heaven knows how anxiously, for the expected answer. There was a moment's pause, during which the young man's heart beat loud and fast, and then the door was opened by the baronet himself. Robert saw that his uncle's valet was already hard at work preparing for his master's hurried journey.

Sir Michael came out into the corridor.

"Have you anything more to say to me, Robert?" he asked, quietly.

"I only came to ascertain if I could assist in any of your arrangements. You go to London by the mail?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea of where you will stay?"

"Yes, I shall stop at the Clarendon; I am known there. Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes; except that Alicia will accompany you."

"Alicia!"

"She could not very well stay here, you know, just now. It would be best for her to leave the Court until—"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted the baronet; "but is there nowhere else that she could go,—must she be with me?"

"She could go nowhere else so immediately; and she would not be happy anywhere else."

"Let her come, then," said Sir Michael, "let her come."

He spoke in a strange subdued voice, and with an apparent effort; as if it were painful to him to have to speak at all. As if all this ordinary business of life were a cruel torture to him; and

jarred so much upon his grief as to be almost worse to bear than that grief itself.

"Very well, my dear uncle, then all is arranged; Alicia will be ready to start at nine o'clock."

"Very good, very good," muttered the baronet; "let her come if she pleases; poor child, let her come."

He sighed heavily as he spoke in that half-pitying tone of his daughter. He was thinking how comparatively indifferent he had been towards that only child for the sake of the woman now shut in the fire-lit room below.

"I shall see you again before you go, sir," said Robert; "I will leave you till then."

"Stay!" said Sir Michael, suddenly; "have you told Alicia?"

"I have told her nothing; except that you are about to leave the Court for some time."

"You are very good, my boy, you are very good," the baronet murmured in a broken voice.

He stretched out his hand. His nephew took it in both his own, and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh, sir! how can I ever forgive myself?" he said; "how can I ever cease to hate myself for having brought this grief upon you?"

"No, no, Robert, you did right—you did right; I wish that God had been so merciful to me as to take my miserable life before this night; but you did right."

Sir Michael re-entered his dressing-room, and Robert slowly returned to the vestibule. He paused upon the threshold of that chamber in which he had left Lucy, Lady Audley; otherwise Helen Talboys, the wife of his lost friend.

She was lying upon the floor; upon the very spot on which she had crouched at her husband's feet telling her guilty story. Whether she was in a swoon; or whether she lay there in the utter helplessness of her misery; Robert scarcely cared to know. He went out into the vestibule, and sent one of the servants to look for her maid, the smart be-ribboned damsel, who was loud in wonder and consternation at the sight of her mistress.

"Lady Audley is very ill," he said; "take her

to her room and see that she does not leave it to-night. You will be good enough to remain near her; but do not either talk to her, or suffer her to excite herself by talking."

My lady had not fainted; she allowed the girl to assist her, and rose from the ground upon which she had grovelled. Her golden hair fell in loose, dishevelled masses about her ivory throat and shoulders; her face and lips were colourless; her eyes terrible in their unnatural light.

"Take me away," she said, "and let me sleep! Let me sleep, for my brain is on fire!"

As she was leaving the room with her maid, she turned and looked at Robert. "Is Sir Michael gone?" she asked.

"He will leave in half an hour."

"There were no lives lost in the fire at Mount Stanning?"

"None."

"I am glad of that."

"The landlord of the house, Marks, was very terribly burned, and lies in a precarious state at his mother's cottage; but he may recover."

"I am glad of that—I am glad no life was lost. Good night, Mr. Audley."

"I shall ask to see you for half an hour's conversation in the course of to-morrow, my lady?"

"Whenever you please. Good night."

"Good night."

She went away, quietly leaning upon her maid's shoulder, and leaving Robert with a sense of strange bewilderment that was very painful to him.

He sat down by the broad hearth upon which the red embers were fading, and wondered at the change in that old house which, until the day of his friend's disappearance, had been so pleasant a home for all who sheltered beneath its hospitable roof. He sat brooding over that desolate hearth, and trying to decide upon what must be done in this sudden crisis. He sat, helpless and powerless to determine upon any course of action, lost in a dull reverie, from which he was aroused by the sound of carriage wheels driving up to the little turret entrance.

The clock in the vestibule struck nine as Robert opened the library-door. Alicia had just descended the stairs with her maid, a rosy-faced country girl.

"Good-bye, Robert," said Miss Audley, holding out her hand to her cousin; "good-bye, and God bless you! You may trust me to take care of papa."

"I am sure I may. God bless you, my dear."

For the second time that night Robert Audley pressed his lips to his cousin's candid forehead; and for the second time the embrace was of a brotherly or paternal character; rather than the rapturous proceeding which it would have been had Sir Harry Towers been the privileged performer.

It was five minutes past nine when Sir Michael came down-stairs, followed by his valet, grave and grey-haired like himself. The baronet was pale, but calm and self-possessed. The hand which he gave to his nephew was as cold as ice; but it was with a steady voice that he bade the young man good-bye.

"I leave all in your hands, Robert," he said, as he turned to leave the house in which he had lived so long. "I may not have heard the end; but I have heard enough. Heaven knows I have no need to hear more. I leave all to you, but you will not be cruel—you will remember how much I loved—"

His voice broke huskily before he could finish the sentence.

"I will remember you in everything, sir," the young man answered. "I will do everything for the best."

A treacherous mist of tears blinded him and shut out his uncle's face, and in another minute the carriage had driven away, and Robert Audley sat alone in the dark library, where only one red spark glowed amongst the pale-grey ashes. He sat alone, trying to think what he ought to do, and with the awful responsibility of a wicked woman's fate upon his shoulders.

"Good heavens," he thought; "surely this must be God's judgment upon the purposeless, vacillating life I led up to the seventh day of last

September. Surely this awful responsibility has been forced upon me in order that I may humble myself to an offended Providence, and confess that a man cannot choose his own life. He cannot say, 'I will take existence lightly, and keep out of the way of the wretched, mistaken, energetic creatures, who fight so heartily in the great battle.' He cannot say, 'I will stop in the tents while the strife is fought, and laugh at the fools who are trampled down in the useless struggle.' He cannot do this. He can only do, humbly and fearfully, that which the Maker who created him has appointed for him to do. If he has a battle to fight, let him fight it faithfully; but woe betide him if he skulks when his name is called in the mighty muster-roll; woe betide him if he hides in the tents when the tocsin summons him to the scene of war!"

One of the servants brought candles into the library; and relighted the fire; but Robert Audley did not stir from his seat by the hearth. He sat as he had often sat in his chambers in Fig-tree

Court, with his elbows resting upon the arms of his chair, and his chin upon his hand.

But he lifted his head as the servant was about to leave the room.

"Can I send a telegram from here to London?" he asked.

"It can be sent from Brentwood, sir,—not from here."

Mr. Audley looked at his watch, thoughtfully.

"One of the men can ride over to Brentwood, sir, if you wish any message to be sent."

"I do wish to send a message; will you manage it for me, Richards?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You can wait, then, while I write the message?"

"Yes, sir."

The man brought writing materials from one of the side-tables, and placed them before Mr. Audley.

Robert dipped a pen in the ink, and stared thoughtfully at one of the candles for a few moments before he began to write.

The message ran thus :—

"From Robert Audley, of Audley Court, Essex, to Francis Wilmington, of Paper Buildings, Temple.

"Dear Wilmington, if you know any physician, experienced in cases of mania, and to be trusted with a secret, be so good as to send me his address by telegraph."

Mr. Audley sealed this document in a stout envelope, and handed it to the man, with a sovereign.

"You will see that this is given to a trustworthy person, Richards," he said, "and let the man wait at the station for the return message. He ought to get it in an hour and a half."

Mr. Richards, who had known Robert Audley in jackets and turn-down collars, departed to execute his commission. Heaven forbid that we should follow him into the comfortable servants' hall at the Court, where the household sat round the blazing fire, discussing in utter bewilderment the events of the day.

Nothing could be wider from the truth than

the speculations of these worthy people. What clue had they to the mystery of that fire-lit room in which a guilty woman had knelt at their master's feet to tell the story of her sinful life? They only knew that which Sir Michael's valet had told them of this sudden journey. How his master was as pale as a sheet, and spoke in a strange voice that didn't sound like his own, somehow, and how you might have knocked him —Mr. Parsons, the valet—down with a feather, if you had been minded to prostrate him by the aid of so feeble a weapon.

The wiseheads of the servants' hall decided that Sir Michael had received sudden intelligence through Mr. Robert—they were wise enough to connect the young man with the catastrophe,—either of the death of some near and dear relation — the elder servants decimated the Audley family in their endeavours to find a likely relation —or of some alarming fall in the funds; or of the failure of some speculation or bank in which the greater part of the baronet's money was invested. The general leaning was towards the failure of a

bank; and every member of the assembly seemed to take a dismal and raven-like delight in the fancy; though such a supposition involved their own ruin in the general destruction of that liberal household.

Robert sat by the dreary hearth, which seemed dreary even now when the blaze of a great wood-fire roared in the wide chimney, and listened to the low wail of the March wind, moaning round the house and lifting the shivering ivy from the walls it sheltered. He was tired and worn out, for remember that he had been awakened from his sleep at two o'clock that morning by the hot breath of blazing timber and the sharp crackling of burning wood-work. But for his presence of mind and cool decision, Mr. Luke Marks would have died a dreadful death. He still bore the traces of the night's peril, for the dark hair had been singed upon one side of his forehead, and his left hand was red and inflamed from the effect of the scorching atmosphere, out of which he had dragged the landlord of the Castle Inn. He was thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and excite-

ment, and he fell into a heavy sleep in his easy-chair before the bright fire, from which he was only awakened by the entrance of Mr. Richards with the return message.

This return message was very brief.

"Dear Audley, always glad to oblige. Alwyn Mosgrave, M.D., 12, Saville Row. Safe."

This, with names and addresses, was all that it contained.

"I shall want another message taken to Brentwood to-morrow morning, Richards," said Mr. Audley, as he folded the telegram. "I should be glad if the man would ride over with it before breakfast. He shall have half-a-sovereign for his trouble."

Mr. Richards bowed.

"Thank you, sir—not necessary, sir; but as you please, of course, sir," he murmured. "At what hour might you wish the man to go?"

Mr. Audley might wish the man to go as early as he could; so it was decided that he should go at six.

"My room is ready I suppose, Richards?" said Robert.

"Yes, sir—your old room."

"Very good. I shall go to bed at once. Bring me a glass of brandy-and-water as hot as you can make it, and wait for the telegram."

The second message was only a very earnest request to Doctor Mosgrave to pay an immediate visit to Audley Court on a matter of serious moment.

Having written this message, Mr. Audley felt that he had done all that he could do. He drank his brandy-and-water. He had actual need of the diluted alcohol, for he had been chilled to the bone by his adventures during the fire. He slowly sipped the pale golden liquid and thought of Clara Talboys, of that earnest girl whose brother's memory was now avenged, whose brother's destroyer was humiliated in the dust. Had she heard of the fire at the Castle Inn! How could she have done otherwise than hear of it in such a place as Mount Stanning? But had she heard that *he* had been in danger, and that he had dis-

tinguished himself by the rescue of a drunken boor? I fear that, even sitting by that desolate hearth, and beneath the roof, whose noble owner was an exile from his own house, Robert Audley was weak enough to think of these things—weak enough to let his fancy wander away to the dismal fir-trees under the cold February sky, and the dark-brown eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost friend.

CHAPTER V.

DR. MOSGRAVE'S ADVICE.

My lady slept. Through that long winter night she slept soundly. Criminals have often so slept their last sleep upon earth; and have been found in the grey morning slumbering peacefully by the gaoler who came to wake them.-

The game had been played and lost. I do not think that my lady had thrown away a card, or missed the making of a trick which she might by any possibility have made: but her opponent's hand had been too powerful for her, and he had won.

She was more at peace now than she had ever been since that day—so soon after her second marriage—on which she had seen the announcement of the return of George Talboys from the gold-fields of Australia. She might rest now, for they now knew the worst of her. There

were no new discoveries to be made. She had flung the horrible burden of an almost unendurable secret off her shoulders, and her selfish sensuous nature resumed its mastery of her. She slept, peacefully nestled in her downy bed, under the soft mountain of silken coverlet, and in the sombre shade of the green velvet curtains. She had ordered her maid to sleep on a low couch in the same room, and she had also ordered that a lamp should be kept burning all night.

Not that I think she had any fear of shadowy visitations in the still hours of the night. She was too thoroughly selfish to care very much for anything that could not hurt her; and she had never heard of a ghost doing any actual and palpable harm. She had feared Robert Audley, but she feared him no longer. He had done his worst; she knew that he could do no more without bringing everlasting disgrace upon the name he venerated.

"They'll put me away somewhere, I suppose," my lady thought, "that is the worst they can do for me."

She looked upon herself as a species of state prisoner, who would have to be taken good care of. A second Iron Mask who must be provided for in some comfortable place of confinement. She abandoned herself to a dull indifference. She had lived a hundred lives within the space of the last few days of her existence, and she had worn out her capacity for suffering; for a time at least.

She took a cup of strong green tea, and a few delicate fragments of toast the next morning with the same air of quiet relish common to condemned creatures who eat their last meal, while the gaolers look on to see that they do not bite fragments off the crockery, or swallow the teaspoon, or do any other violent act tending to the evasion of Mr. Jack Ketch. She ate her breakfast, and took her morning bath, and emerged, with perfumed hair, and in the most exquisitely careless of morning toilets, from her luxurious dressing-room. She looked round at all the costly appointments of the room with a yearning lingering gaze before she turned to leave it; but

there was not one tender recollection in her mind of the man who had caused the furnishing of the chamber, and who in every precious toy that was scattered about in the reckless profusion of magnificence, had laid before her a mute evidence of his love. My lady was thinking how much the things had cost, and how painfully probable it was that the luxurious apartment would soon pass out of her possession.

She looked at herself in the cheval-glass before she left the room. A long night's rest had brought back the delicate rose-tints of her complexion, and the natural lustre of her blue eyes. That unnatural light which had burned so fearfully the day before had gone, and my lady smiled triumphantly as she contemplated the reflection of her beauty. The days were gone in which her enemies could have branded her with white-hot irons, and burned away the loveliness which had done such mischief. Whatever they did to her, they must leave her her beauty, she thought. At the worst they were powerless to rob her of that.

The March day was bright and sunny, with a

cheerless sunshine certainly. My lady wrapped herself in an Indian shawl; a shawl that had cost Sir Michael a hundred guineas. I think she had an idea that it would be well to wear this costly garment; so that if hustled suddenly away, she might carry at least one of her possessions with her. Remember how much she had perilled for a fine house and gorgeous furniture, for carriages and horses, jewels and laces; and do not wonder if she clung with a desperate tenacity to gauds and gew-gaws in the hour of her despair. If she had been Judas she would have held to her thirty pieces of silver to the last moment of her shameful life.

Mr. Robert Audley breakfasted in the library. He sat long over his solitary cup of tea, smoking his meerschaum pipe, and meditating darkly upon the task that lay before him.

"I will appeal to the experience of this Dr. Mosgrave," he thought, "physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century. Surely he will be able to help me."

The first fast train from London arrived at

Audley at half-past ten o'clock, and at five minutes before eleven, Richards, the grave servant, announced Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave.

The physician from Saville Row was a tall man, of about fifty years of age. He was thin and sallow, with lantern jaws, and eyes of a pale feeble grey, that seemed as if they had once been blue, and had faded by the progress of time to their present neutral shade. However powerful the science of medicine as wielded by Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave, it had not been strong enough to put flesh upon his bones, or brightness into his face. He had a strangely expressionless, and yet strangely attentive countenance. He had the face of a man who had spent the greater part of his life in listening to other people, and who had parted with his own individuality, and his own passions at the very outset of his career.

He bowed to Robert Audley, took the opposite seat indicated by him, and addressed his attentive face to the young barrister. Robert saw that the physician's glance for a moment lost its quiet look of attention, and became earnest and searching.

"He is wondering whether I am the patient," thought Mr. Audley, "and is looking for the diagnoses of madness in my face."

Dr. Mosgrave spoke as if in answer to this thought.

"It is not about your own—health—that you wish to consult me?" he said interrogatively.

"Oh, no!"

Dr. Mosgrave looked at his watch, a fifty guinea Benson-made chronometer, which he carried loose in his waistcoat pocket as carelessly as if it had been a potato.

"I need not remind you that my time is precious," he said, "your telegram informed me that my services were required in a case of—danger—as I apprehend, or I should not be here this morning."

Robert Audley had sat looking gloomily at the fire, wondering how he should begin the conversation, and had needed this reminder of the physician's presence.

"You are very good, Dr. Mosgrave," he said, rousing himself by an effort, "and I thank you

very much for having responded to my summons. I am about to appeal to you upon a subject which is more painful to me than words can describe. I am about to implore your advice in a most difficult case, and I trust, almost blindly, to your experience to rescue me, and others who are very dear to me, from a cruel and complicated position."

The business-like attention in Dr. Mosgrave's face grew into a look of interest as he listened to Robert Audley.

"The revelation made by the patient to the physician is I believe as sacred as the confession of a penitent to his priest?" Robert asked gravely.

"Quite as sacred."

"A solemn confidence, to be violated under no circumstances?"

"Most certainly."

Robert Audley looked at the fire again. How much should he tell, or how little, of the dark history of his uncle's second wife.

"I have been given to understand, Dr. Mos-

grave, that you have devoted much of your attention to the treatment of insanity."

"Yes, my practice is almost confined to the treatment of mental diseases."

"Such being the case, I think I may venture to conclude that you sometimes receive strange, and even terrible revelations."

Dr. Mosgrave bowed.

He looked like a man who could have carried, safely locked in his passionless breast, the secrets of a nation, and who would have suffered no inconvenience from the weight of such a burden.

"The story which I am about to tell you is not my own story," said Robert, after a pause, "you will forgive me therefore if I once more remind you that I can only reveal it upon the understanding that under no circumstances, or upon no apparent justification, is that confidence to be betrayed."

Dr. Mosgrave bowed again. A little sternly perhaps this time.

"I am all attention, Mr. Audley," he said, coldly.

Robert Audley drew his chair nearer to that of the physician, and in a low voice began the story which my lady had told upon her knees in the same chamber upon the previous night. Dr. Mosgrave's listening face, turned always towards the speaker, betrayed no surprise at that strange revelation. He smiled once, a grave quiet smile, when Mr. Audley came to that part of the story which told of the conspiracy at Ventnor, but he was not surprised. Robert Audley ended his story at the point at which Sir Michael Audley had interrupted my lady's confession. He told nothing of the disappearance of George Talboys, nor of the horrible suspicions that had grown out of that disappearance. He told nothing of the fire at the Castle Inn.

Dr. Mosgrave shook his head gravely when Mr. Audley came to the end of his story.

"You have nothing further to tell me?" he said.

"No. I do not think there is anything more that need be told," Robert answered, rather evasively.

"You would wish to prove that this lady is

mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley?" said the physician.

Robert Audley stared wondering at the mad doctor. By what process had he so rapidly arrived at the young man's secret desire.

"Yes, I would rather, if possible, think her mad, I should be glad to find that excuse for her."

"And to save the *esclandre* of a Chancery suit, I suppose, Mr. Audley," said Dr. Mosgrave.

Robert shuddered, as he bowed an assent to this remark. It was something worse than a Chancery suit that he dreaded, with a horrible fear. It was a trial for murder that so long had haunted his dreams. How often he had awoke in an agony of shame from a vision of a crowded court-house, and his uncle's wife, in a criminal dock, hemmed in on every side by a sea of eager faces.

"I fear that I shall not be of any use to you," the physician said quietly, "I will see the lady if you please, but I do not believe that she is mad."

"Why not?"

"Because there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that."

"But the taints of hereditary insanity—"

"May descend to the third generation and appear in the lady's children, if she have any. Madness is not necessarily transmitted from mother to daughter. I should be glad to help you, if I could, Mr. Audley, but I do not think there is any proof of insanity in the story you have told me. I do not think any jury in England would accept the plea of insanity in

such a case as this. The best thing that you can do with this lady is to send her back to her first husband; if he will have her."

Robert started at this sudden mention of his friend. "Her first husband is dead—" he answered, "at least he has been missing for some time—and I have reason to believe that he is dead."

Dr. Mosgrave saw the startled movement, and heard the embarrassment in Robert Audley's voice as he spoke of George Talboys.

"The lady's first husband is missing," he said, with a strange emphasis on the word—"you think that he is dead."

He paused for a few moments and looked at the fire, as Robert had looked before.

"Mr. Audley," he said presently, "there must be no half-confidences between us. You have not told me all."

Robert, looking up suddenly, plainly expressed in his face the surprise he felt at these words.

"I should be very poorly able to meet the contingencies of my professional experience," said

Dr. Mosgrave, "if I could not perceive where confidence ends and reservation begins. You have only told me half this lady's story, Mr. Audley. You must tell me more before I can offer you any advice. What has become of the first husband?"

He asked this question in a decisive tone. As if he knew it to be the key-stone of an arch.

"I have already told you, Dr. Mosgrave, that I do not know."

"Yes," answered the physician, "but your face has told me what you would have withheld from me; it has told me that you *suspect!*"

Robert Audley was silent.

"If I am to be of use to you, you must trust me, Mr. Audley," said the physician. "The first husband disappeared—how and when? I want to know the history of his disappearance."

Robert paused for some time before he replied to this speech; but by and by, he lifted his head, which had been bent in an attitude of earnest thought, and addressed the physician.

"I will trust you, Dr. Mosgrave," he said, "I

will confide entirely in your honour and goodness. I do not ask you to do any wrong to society; but I ask you to save our stainless name from degradation and shame, if you can do so conscientiously."

He told the story of George's disappearance, and of his own doubts and fears, heaven knows how reluctantly.

Dr. Mosgrave listened as quietly as he had listened before. Robert concluded with an earnest appeal to the physician's best feelings. He implored him to spare the generous old man, whose fatal confidence in a wicked woman had brought such misery upon his declining years.

It was impossible to draw any conclusion either favourable or otherwise from Dr. Mosgrave's attentive face. He rose when Robert had finished speaking, and looked at his watch once more.

"I can only spare you twenty minutes," he said, "I will see the lady if you please. You say her mother died in a mad-house."

"She did. Will you see Lady Audley alone?"

"Yes, alone if you please."

Robert rang for my lady's maid, and under convoy of that smart young damsel the physician found his way to the octagon ante-chamber, and the fairy boudoir with which it communicated.

Ten minutes afterwards he returned to the library in which Robert sat waiting for him.

"I have talked to the lady," he said quietly, "and we understand each other very well. There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time. It would be *dementia* in its worst phase perhaps: acute mania; but its duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!"

Dr. Mosgrave walked up and down the room once or twice before he spoke again.

"I will not discuss the probabilities of the suspicion that distresses you, Mr. Audley," he

said presently, "but I will tell you this much. I do not advise any *esclandre*. This Mr. George Talboys has disappeared, but you have no evidence of his death. If you could produce evidence of his death, you could produce no evidence against this lady, beyond the one fact that she had a powerful motive for getting rid of him. No jury in the United Kingdom would condemn her upon such evidence as that."

Robert Audley interrupted Doctor Mosgrave hastily.

"I assure you, my dear Sir," he said, "that my greatest fear is the necessity of any exposure —any disgrace.'

"Certainly, Mr. Audley," answered the physician coolly, "but you cannot expect me to assist you to condone one of the worst offences against society. If I saw adequate reason for believing that a murder had been committed by this woman, I should refuse to assist you in smuggling her away out of the reach of justice, although the honour of a hundred noble families might be saved by my doing so. But I do not see adequate

reason for your suspicions; and I will do my best to help you."

Robert Audley grasped the physician's hands in both his own.

"I will thank you when I am better able to do so," he said, with emotion, "I will thank you in my uncle's name as well as in my own."

"I have only five minutes more, and I have a letter to write," said Dr. Mosgrave, smiling at the young man's energy.

He seated himself at a writing table in the window, dipped his pen in the ink and wrote rapidly for about seven minutes. He had filled three sides of a sheet of note paper when he threw down his pen and folded his letter.

He put this letter into an envelope and delivered it, unsealed, to Robert Audley.

The address which it bore was—

Monsieur Val,

Villebrumeuse,

Belgium.

Mr. Audley looked rather doubtfully from this address to the doctor, who was putting on his

gloves as deliberately as if his life had never known a more solemn purpose than the proper adjustment of them.

"That letter," he said, in answer to Robert Audley's inquiring look, "is written to my friend Monsieur Val, the proprietor and medical superintendent of a very excelleent *maison de santé* in the town of Villebrumeuse. We have known each other for many years, and he will no doubt willingly receive Lady Audley into his establishment, and charge himself with the full responsibility of her future life; it will not be a very eventful one!"

Robert Audley would have spoken, he would have once more expressed his gratitude for the help which had been given to him, but Dr. Mosgrave checked him with an authoritative gesture.

"From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house," he said, "her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets for ever! Whatever crimes she may have

committed she will be able to commit no more. If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations. But as a physiologist and as an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this; for physiology is a lie if the woman I saw ten minutes ago is a woman to be trusted at large. If she could have sprung at my throat and strangled me with her little hands, as I sat talking to her just now, she would have done it."

"She suspected your purpose, then!"

"She knew it. 'You think I am mad like my mother, and you have come to question me,' she said. 'You are watching for some sign of the dreadful taint in my blood.' Good day to you, Mr. Audley," the physician added hurriedly, "my time was up ten minutes ago, it is as much as I shall do to catch the train."

CHAPTER VI.

BURIED ALIVE.

ROBERT AUDLEY sat alone in the library with the physician's letter upon the table before him, thinking of the work which was still to be done.

The young barrister had constituted himself the denouncer of this wretched woman. He had been her judge; and he was now her gaoler. Not until he had delivered the letter which lay before him to its proper address, not until he had given up his charge into the safe keeping of the foreign mad-house doctor, not until then would the dreadful burden be removed from him and his duty done.

He wrote a few lines to my lady, telling her that he was going to carry her away from Audley Court to a place from which she was not likely to return, and requesting her to lose no time in preparing for the journey. He wished to start that evening, if possible, he told her.

Miss Susan Martin, the lady's-maid, thought it a very hard thing to have to pack her mistress's trunks in such a hurry, but my lady assisted in the task. It seemed a pleasant excitement to her, this folding and refolding of silks and velvets, this gathering together of jewels and millinery. They were not going to rob her of her possessions, she thought. They were going to send her away to some place of exile; but even exile was not hopeless, for there was scarcely any spot upon this wide earth in which her beauty would not constitute a little royalty, and win her liege knights and willing subjects. She toiled resolutely in directing and assisting her servant, who scented bankruptcy and ruin in all this packing up and hurrying away, and was therefore rather languid and indifferent in the discharge of her duties; and at six o'clock in the evening she sent her attendant to tell Mr. Audley that she was ready to depart as soon as he pleased.

Robert had consulted a volume of *Bradshaw*, and had discovered that Villebrumeuse lay out of the track of all railway traffic, and was only

approachable by diligence from Brussels. The mail for Dover left London Bridge at nine o'clock, and could be easily caught by Robert and his charge, as the seven o'clock up-train from Audley reached Shoreditch at a quarter past eight. Travelling by the Dover and Calais route, they would reach Villebrumeuse by the following afternoon or evening.

What need have we to follow them upon that dismal night journey? My lady lay on one of the narrow cabin couches, comfortably wrapped in her furs; she had not forgotten her favourite Russian sables even in this last hour of shame and misery. Her mercenary soul hankered greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had been mistress. She had hidden away fragile tea-cups and covered vases of Sèvres and Dresden among the folds of her silken dinner dresses. She had secreted jewelled and golden drinking cups amongst her delicate linen. She would have taken the pictures from the walls, and the Gobelin tapestry from the chairs, had it been possible for her to do so. She had taken all the could, and she accompanied Mr. Audley

with a sulky submission, that was the despondent obedience of despair.

Robert Audley paced the deck of the steamer as the Dover clocks were striking twelve, and the town glimmered like a luminous crescent across the widening darkness of the sea. The vessel flew swiftly through the rolling waters towards the friendly Gallic shore, and Mr. Audley sighed a long sigh of relief as he remembered how soon his work would be done. He thought of the wretched creature lying forlorn and friendless in the cabin below. But when he pitied her most, and he could not but sometimes pity her for her womanhood and her helplessness, his friend's face came back upon him, bright and hopeful as he had seen it only on that first day of George's return from the Antipodes, and with that memory there returned his horror of the shameful lie that had broken the husband's heart.

"Can I ever forget it?" he thought; "can I ever forget his blank white face as he sat opposite to me at the coffee house, with the *Times* newspaper in his hand? There are some

crimes that can never be atoned for, and this is one of them. If I could bring George Talboys to life to-morrow, I could never heal that horrible heart-wound; I could never make him the man he was before he read that printed lie."

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when the diligence bumped and rattled over the uneven paving of the principal street in Villebrumeuse. The old ecclesiastical town, always dull and dreary, seemed more than ordinarily dreary under the grey evening sky. The twinkling lamps, lighted early, and glimmering feebly, long distances apart, made the place seem darker rather than lighter, as glow-worms intensify the blackness of a hedge by their shining presence. The remote Belgian city was a forgotten, old world place, and bore the dreary evidence of decay upon every façade in the narrow streets, on every dilapidated roof, and feeble pile of chimneys. It was difficult to imagine for what reason the opposite rows of houses had been built so close together as to

cause the lumbering diligence to brush the foot passengers off the wretched *trottoir*, unless they took good care to scrape the shop windows with their garments, for there was building room enough and to spare upon the broad expanse of flat country that lay behind the old city. Hypercritical travellers might have wondered why the narrowest and most uncomfortable streets were the busiest and most prosperous, while the nobler and broader thoroughfares were empty and deserted. But Robert Audley thought of none of these things. He sat in a corner of the mouldy carriage, watching my lady in the opposite corner, and wondering what the face was like that was so carefully hidden beneath her veil.

They had had the *coupé* of the diligence to themselves for the whole of the journey, for there were not many travellers between Brussels and Villebrumeuse, and the public conveyance was supported by the force of tradition rather than by any great profit attaching to it as a speculation.

My lady had not spoken during the journey, except to decline some refreshments which Robert

had offered her at a halting-place upon the road. Her heart sank when they left Brussels behind, for she had hoped that city might have been the end of her journey, and she had turned with a feeling of sickness and despair from the dull Belgian landscape.

She looked up at last as the vehicle jolted into a great stony quadrangle, which had been the approach to a monastery once, but which was now the courtyard of a dismal hotel, in whose cellars legions of rats skirmished and squeaked even while the broad sunshine was bright in the chambers above.

Lady Audley shuddered as she alighted from the diligence, and found herself in that dreary courtyard. Robert was surrounded by chattering porters, who clamoured for his "baggages," and disputed amongst themselves as to the hotel at which he was to rest. One of these men ran away to fetch a hackney-coach at Mr. Audley's behest, and reappeared presently, urging on a pair of horses—which were so small as to suggest the idea that they had been made out of one ordinary-sized animal—with wild shrieks and

whoops that had a demoniac sound in the darkness.

Mr. Audley left my lady in a dreary coffee-room in the care of a drowsy attendant while he drove away to some distant part of the quiet city. There was official business to be gone through before Sir Michael's wife could be quietly put away in the place suggested by Dr. Mosgrave. Robert had to see all manner of important personages; and to take numerous oaths; and to exhibit the English physician's letter; and to go through much ceremony of signing and countersigning, before he could take his lost friend's cruel wife to the home which was to be her last upon earth. Upwards of two hours elapsed before all this was arranged and the young man was free to return to the hotel, where he found his charge staring absently at a pair of wax candles, with a cup of untasted coffee standing cold and stagnant before her.

Robert handed my lady into the hired vehicle, and took his seat opposite to her once more.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked, at last. "I am tired of being treated

like some naughty child, who is put into a dark cellar as a punishment for its offences. Where are you taking me?"

"To a place in which you will have ample leisure to repent the past, Mrs. Talboys," Robert answered, gravely.

They had left the paved streets behind them, and had emerged out of a great gaunt square, in which there appeared to be about half a dozen cathedrals, into a smooth boulevard, a broad lamp-lit road, on which the shadows of the leafless branches went and came tremblingly, like the shadows of paralytic skeletons. There were houses here and there upon this boulevard; stately houses, *entre cour et jardin*, and with plaster vases of geraniums on the stone pillars of the ponderous gateways. The rumbling hackney-carriage drove upwards of three-quarters of a mile along this smooth roadway before it drew up against a gateway, older and more ponderous than any of those they had passed.

My lady gave a little scream as she looked out of the coach window. The gaunt gateway was

lighted by an enormous lamp; a great structure of iron and glass, in which one poor little shivering flame struggled with the March wind.

The coachman rang the bell, and a little wooden door at the side of the gate was opened by a grey-haired man, who looked out at the carriage, and then retired. He reappeared three minutes afterwards behind the folding iron gates which he unlocked and threw back to their full extent, revealing a dreary desert. of stone-paved courtyard.

The coachman led his wretched horses into this courtyard, and piloted the vehicle to the principal doorway of the house, a great mansion of grey stone, with several long ranges of windows, many of which were dimly lighted, and looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night.

My lady, watchful and quiet as the cold stars in the wintry sky, looked up at these casements with an earnest and scrutinising gaze. One of the windows was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman

with a fantastic head-dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backwards and forwards before the window.

Sir Michael Audley's wicked wife laid her hand suddenly upon Robert's arm, and pointed with the other hand to this curtained window.

"I know where you have brought me," she said. "This is a MAD-HOUSE."

Mr. Audley did not answer her. He had been standing at the door of the coach when she addressed him, and he quietly assisted her to alight, and led her up a couple of shallow stone-steps, and into the entrance-hall of the mansion. He handed Doctor Mosgrave's letter to a neatly-dressed, cheerful-looking, middle-aged woman, who came tripping out of a little chamber which opened out of the hall, and was very much like the bureau of an hotel. This person smilingly welcomed Robert and his charge; and after dispatching a servant with the letter, invited them into her pleasant little apartment, which was gaily furnished with bright amber curtains and heated by a tiny stove.

"Madame finds herself very much fatigued," the

Frenchwoman said, interrogatively, with a look of intense sympathy, as she placed an arm-chair for my lady.

"Madame" shrugged her shoulders wearily, and looked round the little chamber with a sharp glance of scrutiny that betokened no very great favour.

"WHAT is this place, Robert Audley?" she cried fiercely. "Do you think I am a baby, that you may juggle with and deceive me—what is it? It is what I said just now, is it not?"

"It is a *maison de santé*, my lady," the young man answered gravely. "I have no wish to juggle with or to deceive you."

My lady paused for a few moments, looking reflectively at Robert.

"A *maison de santé*," she repeated. "Yes, they manage these things better in France. In England we should call it a mad-house. This is a house for mad people, this, is it not, Madame?" she said, in French, turning upon the woman, and tapping the polished floor with her foot.

"Ah, but no, Madame," the woman answered,

with a shrill scream of protest. "It is an establishment of the most agreeable, where one amuses oneself—"

She was interrupted by the entrance of the principal of this agreeable establishment, who came beaming into the room with a radiant smile illuminating his countenance, and with Dr. Mosgrave's letter open in his hand.

It was impossible for him to say *how* enchanted he was to make the acquaintance of M'sieu. There was nothing upon earth which he was not ready to do for M'sieu in his own person, and nothing under heaven which he would not strive to accomplish for him, as the friend of his acquaintance, so very much distinguished, the English doctor. Dr. Mosgrave's letter had given him a brief synopsis of the case, he informed Robert, in an undertone, and he was quite prepared to undertake the care of the charming and very interesting Madame—Madame—

He rubbed his hands politely, and looked at Robert. Mr. Audley remembered, for the first time, that he had been recommended to introduce his wretched charge under a feigned name.

He affected not to hear the proprietor's question. It might seem a very easy matter to have hit upon a heap of names, any one of which would have answered his purpose; but Mr. Audley appeared suddenly to have forgotten that he had ever heard any mortal appellation except that of himself and his lost friend.

Perhaps the proprietor perceived and understood his embarrassment. He at any rate relieved it by turning to the woman who had received them, and muttering something about No. 14, Bis. The woman took a key from a long range of others that hung over the mantelpiece, and a wax candle from a bracket in a corner of the room, and having lighted the candle, led the way across the stone-paved hall, and up a broad slippery staircase of polished wood.

The English physician had informed his Belgian colleague that money would be of minor consequence in any arrangements made for the comfort of the English lady who was to be committed to his care. Acting upon this hint, Monsieur Val opened the outer door of a stately suite of apartments, which included a lobby,

paved with alternate diamonds of black and white marble, but of a dismal and cellarlike darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funereal splendour which is not peculiarly conducive to the elevation of the spirits; and a bed-chamber, containing a bed so wondrously made, as to appear to have no opening whatever in its coverings, unless the counterpane had been split asunder with a penknife.

My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin.

Amid all the faded splendour of shabby velvet, and tarnished gilding, and polished wood, the woman dropped into an arm-chair, and covered

her face with her hands. The whiteness of them, and the starry light of diamonds trembling about them glittered in the dimly-lighted chamber. She sat silent, motionless, despairing, sullen, and angry, while Robert and the French doctor retired into an outer chamber, and talked together in undertones. Mr. Audley had very little to say that had not been already said for him, with a far better grace than he himself could have expressed it, by the English physician. He had, after great trouble of mind, hit upon the name of Taylor, as a safe and simple substitute for that other name to which alone my lady had a right. He told the Frenchman that this Mrs. Taylor was distantly related to him—that she had inherited the seeds of madness from her mother, as indeed Dr. Mosgrave had informed Monsieur Val, and that she had shown some fearful tokens of the lurking taint that was latent in her mind; but that she was not to be called "mad." He begged that she might be treated with all tenderness and compassion; that she might receive all reasonable indulgences; but he impressed upon Monsieur Val, that under no circum-

stances was she to be permitted to leave the house and grounds without the protection of some reliable person, who should be answerable for her safe keeping. He had only one other point to urge, and that was that Monsieur Val, who, as he had understood, was himself a Protestant — the doctor bowed — would make arrangements with some kind and benevolent Protestant clergyman, through whom spiritual advice and consolation might be secured for the invalid lady; who had especial need, Robert added, gravely, of such advantages.

This—with all necessary arrangements as to pecuniary matters, which were to be settled from time to time between Mr. Audley and the doctor, unassisted by any agents whatever—was the extent of the conversation between the two men, and occupied about a quarter of an hour. My lady sat in the same attitude when they re-entered the bedchamber in which they had left her, with her ringed hands still clasped over her face.

Robert bent over her to whisper in her ear.

"Your name is Madame Taylor here," he said.

"I do not think you would wish to be known by your real name."

She only shook her head in answer to him, and did not even remove her hands from over her face.

"Madame will have an attendant entirely devoted to her service," said Monsieur Val. "Madame will have all her wishes obeyed; her *reasonable* wishes, but that goes without saying," Monsieur adds, with a quaint shrug. "Every effort will be made to render Madame's sojourn at Villebrumeuse agreeable, and as much profitable as agreeable. The inmates dine together when it is wished. I dine with the inmates, sometimes; my subordinate, a clever and a worthy man, always. I reside with my wife and children in a little pavilion in the grounds; my subordinate resides in the establishment. Madame may rely upon our utmost efforts being exerted to ensure her comfort."

Monsieur is saying a great deal more to the same effect, rubbing his hands and beaming radiantly upon Robert and his charge, when Madame rises suddenly, erect and furious, and

dropping her jewelled fingers from before her face, tells him to hold his tongue.

"Leave me alone with the man who has brought me here," she cried between her set teeth. "Leave me!"

She points to the door with a sharp imperious gesture; so rapid that the silken drapery about her arm makes a swooping sound as she lifts her hand. The sibillant French syllables hiss through her teeth as she utters them, and seem better fitted to her mood and to herself than the familiar English she has spoken hitherto.

The French doctor shrugs his shoulders as he goes out into the dark lobby, and mutters something about a "beautiful devil," and a gesture worthy of "the Mars." My lady walked with a rapid footstep to the door between the bedchamber and the saloon; closed it, and with the handle of the door still in her hand, turned and looked at Robert Audley.

"You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley," she cried; "you have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave."

"I have done that which I thought just to others and merciful to you," Robert answered, quietly; "I should have been a traitor to society had I suffered you to remain at liberty after—after the disappearance of George Talboys and the fire at the Castle Inn. I have brought you to a place in which you will be kindly treated by people who have no knowledge of your story—no power to taunt or to reproach you. You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures unto the end. The solitude of your existence in this place will be no greater than that of a king's daughter, who, flying from the evil of the time, was glad to take shelter in a house as tranquil as this. Surely it is a small atonement which I ask you to render for your sins, a light penance which I call upon you to perform. Live here and repent; nobody will assail you, nobody will torment you. I only say to you, repent!"

"I *cannot!*" cried my lady, pushing her hair fiercely from her white forehead, and fixing her dilated eyes upon Robert Audley, "I *cannot!*

Has my beauty brought me to *this?* Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself, and laid awake in the long deadly nights trembling to think of my dangers, for *this?* I had better have given up at once, since *this* was to be the end. I had better have yielded to the curse that was upon me, and given up when George Talboys first came back to England."

She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty.

"I would laugh at you and defy you if I dared," she cried; "I would kill myself and defy you if I dared. But I am a poor, pitiful coward, and have been so from the first. Afraid of my mother's horrible inheritance; afraid of poverty; afraid of George Talboys; afraid of *you.*"

She was silent for a little while, but she still held her place by the door, as if determined to detain Robert as long as it was her pleasure to do so.

"Do you know what I am thinking of?" she said presently. "Do you know what I am thinking of, as I look at you in the dim light of this room? I am thinking of the day upon which George Talboys—disappeared."

Robert started as she mentioned the name of his lost friend; his face turned pale in the dusky light, and his breathing grew quicker and louder.

"He was standing opposite me as you are standing now," continued my lady. "You said that you would raze the old house to the ground; that you would root up every tree in the gardens to find your dead friend. You would have had no need to do so much; the body of George Talboys lies at the bottom of the old well, in the shrubbery beyond the lime-walk."

Robert Audley flung up his hands and clasped them above his head, with one loud cry of horror.

"Oh, my God!" he said, after a dreadful pause, "have all the ghastly things that I have thought prepared me so little for the ghastly truth, that it should come upon me like this at last?"

"He came to me in the lime-walk," resumed

my lady, in the same hard, dogged tone as that in which she had confessed the wicked story of her life. "I knew that he would come, and I had prepared myself, as well as I could, to meet him. I was determined to bribe him, to cajole him, to defy him; to do anything sooner than abandon the wealth and the position I had won, and go back to my old life. He came, and he reproached me for the conspiracy at Ventnor. He declared that so long as he lived he would never forgive me for the lie that had broken his heart. He told me that I had plucked his heart out of his breast and trampled upon it; and that he had now no heart in which to feel one sentiment of mercy for me. That he would have forgiven me any wrong upon earth, but that one deliberate and passionless wrong that I had done him. He said this and a great deal more, and he told me that no power on earth should turn him from his purpose, which was to take me to the man I had deceived, and make me tell my wicked story. He did not know the hidden taint that I had sucked in with my mother's milk. He did not know that it was possible to drive me mad. He

goaded me as you have goaded me; he was as merciless as you have been merciless. We were in the shrubbery at the end of the lime-walk. I was seated upon the broken masonry at the mouth of the well. George Talboys was leaning upon the disused windlass, in which the rusty iron spindle rattled loosely whenever he shifted his position. I rose at last, and turned upon him to defy him, as I had determined to defy him at the worst. I told him that if he denounced me to Sir Michael, I would declare him to be a madman or a liar, and I defied him to convince the man who loved me—blindly as I told him—that he had any claim to me. I was going to leave him after having told him this, when he caught me by the wrist and detained me by force. You saw the bruises that his fingers made upon my wrist and noticed them, and did not believe the account I gave of them. I could see that, Mr. Robert Audley, and I saw that you were a person I should have to fear."

She paused, as if she had expected Robert to speak; but he stood silent and motionless, waiting for the end.

"George Talboys treated me as you treated me," she said presently. "He swore that if there was but one witness of my identity, and that witness was removed from Audley Court by the width of the whole earth, he would bring him there to swear to my identity, and to denounce me. It was then that I was mad. It was then that I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well. There is a legend of its enormous depth. I do not know how deep it is. It is dry, I suppose; for I heard no splash; only a dull thud. I looked down and I saw nothing but black emptiness. I knelt down and listened, but the cry was not repeated, though I waited for nearly a quarter of an hour—God knows how long it seemed to me—by the mouth of the well."

Robert Audley uttered no word of horror when the story was finished. He moved a little nearer towards the door against which Helen Talboys stood Had there been any other means of exit from the room, he would gladly have availed

himself of it. He shrank from even a momentary contact with this creature.

"Let me pass you, if you please," he said, in an icy voice.

"You see I do not fear to make my confession to you," said Helen Talboys, "for two reasons. The first is that you dare not use it against me, because you know it would kill your uncle to see me in a criminal dock; the second is, that the law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house. You see I do not thank you for your mercy, Mr. Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth."

She moved away from the door, and Robert passed her, without a word, without a look.

Half an hour afterwards he was in one of the principal hotels at Villebrumeuse, sitting at a neatly-ordered supper-table, with no power to eat; with no power to distract his mind, even for a moment, from the image of that lost friend who had been treacherously murdered in the thicket at Audley Court.

CHAPTER VII.

GHOST-HAUNTED.

No feverish sleeper travelling in a strange dream ever looked out more wonderingly upon a world that seemed unreal than Robert Audley, as he stared absently at the flat swamps and dismal poplars between Villebrumeuse and Brussels. Could it be that he was returning to his uncle's house without the woman who had reigned in it for nearly two years as queen and mistress? He felt as if he had carried off my lady, and had made away with her secretly and darkly, and must now render up an account to Sir Michael of the fate of that woman, whom the baronet had so dearly loved.

"What shall I tell him," he thought; "shall I tell the truth—the horrible ghastly truth? No; that would be too cruel. His generous spirit would sink under the hideous revelation. Yet, in his

ignorance of the extent of this wretched woman's wickedness, he may think perhaps that I have been hard with her."

Brooding thus, Mr. Robert Audley absently watched the cheerless landscape from his seat in the shabby *coupé* of the diligence, and thought how great a leaf had been torn out of his life, now that the dark story of George Talboys was finished.

What had he to do next? A crowd of horrible thoughts rushed into his mind as he remembered the story that he had heard from the white lips of Helen Talboys. His friend—his murdered friend—lay hidden amongst the mouldering ruins of the old well at Audley Court. He had lain there for six long months, unburied, unknown; hidden in the darkness of the old convent well. What was to be done?

To institute a search for the remains of the murdered man was to inevitably bring about a coroner's inquest. Should such an inquest be held, it was next to impossible that the history of my lady's crime could fail to be brought to light.

To prove that George Talboys met with his death at Audley Court was to prove almost as surely that my lady had been the instrument of that mysterious death; for the young man had been known to follow her into the lime-walk upon the day of his disappearance.

"My God!" Robert exclaimed, as the full horror of this position became evident to him, "is my friend to rest in his unhallowed burial-place because I have condoned the offences of the woman who murdered him?"

He felt that there was no way out of this difficulty. Sometimes he thought that it little mattered to his dead friend whether he lay entombed beneath a marble monument, whose workmanship should be the wonder of the universe, or in that obscure hiding-place in the thicket at Audley Court. At another time he would be seized with a sudden horror at the wrong that had been done to the murdered man, and would fain have travelled even more rapidly than the express between Brussels and Paris could carry him, in his eagerness to reach the

end of his journey, that he might set right this cruel wrong.

He was in London at dusk on the second day after that on which he had left Audley Court, and he drove straight to the Clarendon, to inquire after his uncle. He had no intention of seeing Sir Michael, as he had not yet determined how much or how little he should tell him, but he was very anxious to ascertain how the old man had sustained the cruel shock he had so lately endured.

"I will see Alicia," he thought; "she will tell me all about her father. It is only two days since he left Audley. I can scarcely expect to hear of any favourable change."

But Mr. Audley was not destined to see his cousin that evening, for the servants at the Clarendon told him that Sir Michael and his daughter had left by the morning mail for Paris, on their way to Vienna.

Robert was very well pleased to receive this intelligence; it afforded him a welcome respite, for it would be decidedly better to tell the baronet

nothing of his guilty wife until he returned to England, with his health unimpaired, and his spirits re-established, it was to be hoped.

Mr. Audley drove to the Temple. The chambers which had seemed dreary to him ever since the disappearance of George Talboys were doubly so to-night. For that which had been only a dark suspicion had now become a horrible certainty. There was no longer room for the palest ray, the most transitory glimmer of hope. His worst terrors had been too well founded.

George Talboys had been cruelly and treacherously murdered by the wife he had loved and mourned.

There were three letters waiting for Mr. Audley at his chambers. One was from Sir Michael, and another from Alicia. The third was addressed in a hand the young barrister knew only too well, though he had seen it but once before. His face flushed redly at the sight of the superscription, and he took the letter in his hand, carefully and tenderly, as if it had been a living thing, and sentient to his touch. He turned it over and

over in his hands, looking at the crest upon the envelope, at the post-mark, at the colour of the paper, and then put it into the bosom of his waistcoat with a strange smile upon his face.

"What a wretched and unconscionable fool I am," he thought. "Have I laughed at the follies of weak men all my life, and am I to be more foolish than the weakest of them at last? The beautiful brown-eyed creature! Why did I ever see her? Why did my relentless Nemesis ever point the way to that dreary house in Dorsetshire?"

He opened the two first letters. He was foolish enough to keep the last for a delicious morsel—a fairy-like dessert after the commonplace substantialities of a dinner.

Alicia's letter told him that Sir Michael had borne his agony with such a persevering tranquillity that she had become at last far more alarmed by his patient calmness than by any stormy manifestation of despair. In this difficulty she had secretly called upon the physician who attended the Audley household in any cases of serious illness, and had requested this gentleman

to pay Sir Michael an apparently accidental visit. He had done so, and after stopping half an hour with the baronet, had told Alicia that there was no present danger of any serious consequence from this quiet grief, but that it was necessary that every effort should be made to arouse Sir Michael, and to force him, however unwillingly, into action.

Alicia had immediately acted upon this advice, had resumed her old empire as a spoiled child, and reminded her father of a promise he had made of taking her through Germany. With considerable difficulty she had induced him to consent to fulfilling this old promise, and having once gained her point, she had contrived that they should leave England as soon as it was possible to do so, and she told Robert, in conclusion, that she would not bring her father back to his old house until she had taught him to forget the sorrows associated with it.

The Baronet's letter was very brief. It contained half a dozen blank cheques on Sir Michael Audley's London bankers.

"You will require money, my dear Robert," he wrote, "for such arrangements as you may think fit to make for the future comfort of the person I committed to your care. I need scarcely tell you that those arrangements cannot be too liberal. But perhaps it is as well that I should tell you now, for the first and only time, that it is my earnest wish never again to hear that person's name. I have no wish to be told the nature of the arrangements you may make for her. I am sure that you will act conscientiously and mercifully. I seek to know no more. Whenever you want money, you will draw upon me for any sums that you may require; but you will have no occasion to tell me for whose use you want that money."

Robert Audley breathed a long sigh of relief as he folded this letter. It released him from a duty which it would have been most painful for him to perform, and it for ever decided his course of action with regard to the murdered man.

George Talboys must lie at peace in his unknown grave, and Sir Michael Audley must never

learn that the woman he had loved bore the red brand of murder on her soul.

Robert had only the third letter to open—the letter which he had placed in his bosom while he read the others; he tore open the envelope, handling it carefully and tenderly as he had done before.

The letter was as brief as Sir Michael's. It contained only these few lines:—

"Dear Mr. Audley,—

"The rector of this place has been twice to see Marks, the man you saved in the fire at the Castle Inn. He lies in a very precarious state at his mother's cottage, near Audley Court, and is not expected to live many days. His wife is attending him, and both he and she have expressed a most earnest desire that you should see him before he dies. Pray come without delay.

"Yours very sincerely,

"Clara Talboys.

"Mount Stanning Rectory, March 6."

Robert Audley folded this letter very reverently, and replaced it underneath that part of his

waistcoat which might be supposed to cover the region of his heart. Having done this, he seated himself in his favourite arm-chair, filled and lighted a pipe, and smoked it out, staring reflectively at the fire as long as his tobacco lasted. The lazy light that glimmered in his handsome grey eyes told of a dreamy reverie that could have scarcely been either gloomy or unpleasant. His thoughts wandered away upon the blue clouds of hazy tobacco smoke, and carried him into a bright region of unrealities, in which there was neither death nor trouble, grief nor shame; only himself and Clara Talboys in a world that was made all their own by the great omnipotence of their loves.

It was not till the last shred of pale Turkish tobacco had been consumed, and the grey ashes knocked out upon the topmost bar of the grate, that this pleasant dream floated off into the great storehouse in which the visions of things that never have been and never are to be, are kept locked and guarded by some stern enchanter, who only turns the keys now and then and opens the door

of his treasure-house a little way for the brief delight of mankind. But the dream fled, and the heavy burden of dismal realities fell again upon Robert's shoulders, more tenacious than any old man of the sea. "What can that man Marks want with me?" thought the barrister. "He is afraid to die until he has made a confession, perhaps. He wishes to tell me that which I know already,—the story of my lady's crime. I knew that he was in the secret. I was sure of it even upon the night on which I first saw him. He knew the secret, and he traded on it."

Robert Audley shrank strangely from returning to Essex. How should he meet Clara Talboys now that he knew the secret of her brother's fate. How many lies he should have to tell, or how much equivocation he must use in order to keep the truth from her. Yet would there be any mercy in telling her that horrible story, the knowledge of which must cast a blight upon her youth, and blot out every hope she had ever secretly cherished. He knew by his own experience how possible it was to hope against hope,

and to hope unconsciously; and he could not bear that her heart should be crushed as his had been by the knowledge of the truth. "Better that she should hope vainly to the last," he thought; "better that she should go through life seeking the clue to her lost brother's fate, than that I should give that clue into her hands and say, 'Our worst fears are realised. The brother you loved has been foully murdered in the early promise of his youth.'"

But Clara Talboys had written to him imploring him to return to Essex without delay. Could he refuse to do her bidding, however painful its accomplishment might be. And again, the man was dying, perhaps, and had implored to see him. Would it not be cruel to refuse to go, to delay an hour unnecessarily? He looked at his watch. It wanted only five minutes to nine. There was no train to Audley after the Ipswich mail, which left London at half-past eight; but there was a train that left Shoreditch at eleven, and stopped at Brentwood between twelve and one. Robert decided upon going by this train, and

walking the distance between Brentwood and Audley, which was upwards of six miles.

He had a long time to wait before it would be necessary to leave the Temple on his way to Shoreditch, and he sat brooding darkly over the fire and wondering at the strange events which had filled his life within the last year and a half, coming like angry shadows between his lazy inclinations and himself, and investing him with purposes that were not his own.

"Good heavens!" he thought, as he smoked his second pipe, "how can I believe that it was I who used to lounge all day in this easy chair reading Paul de Kock, and smoking mild Turkish, who used to drop in at half-price to stand amongst the press men at the back of the boxes, and see a new burlesque, and finish the evening with the "Chough and Crow," and chops and pale ale at Evans's. Was it I to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round? Was it I, who was one of the boys who sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud, and work their hardest in the hope of a ride when their work is

done? Heaven knows I have learnt the business of life since then; and now I must needs fall in love and swell the tragic chorus which is always being sung by the poor addition of my pitiful sighs and groans. Clara Talboys! Clara Talboys! Is there any merciful smile latent beneath the earnest light of your brown eyes. What would you say to me if I told you that I love you as earnestly and truly as I have mourned for your brother's fate—that the new strength and purpose of my life which has grown out of my friendship for the murdered man grows even stronger as it turns to you, and changes me until I wonder at myself. What would she say to me? Ah! Heaven knows. If she happened to like the colour of my hair, or the tone of my voice, she might listen to me, perhaps. But would she hear me any more because I love her truly and purely; because I would be constant, and honest, and faithful to her? Not she! These things might move her, perhaps, to be a little pitiful to me; but they would move her no more! If a girl with freckles and white eyelashes adored me,

I should only think her a nuisance; but if Clara Talboys had a fancy to trample upon my uncouth person I should think she did me a favour. I hope poor little Alicia may pick up with some fair-haired Saxon in the course of her travels. I hope—" His thoughts wandered away wearily, and lost themselves. How could he hope for anything, or think of anything, while the memory of his dead friend's unburied body haunted him like a horrible spectre? He remembered a story—a morbid, hideous, yet delicious story, which had once pleasantly congealed his blood on a social winter's evening—the story of a man, a monomaniac, perhaps, who had been haunted at every turn by the image of an unburied kinsman who *could* not rest in his unhallowed hiding-place. What if that dreadful story had its double in reality? What if he were henceforth to be haunted by the phantom of murdered George Talboys?

He pushed his hair away from his face with both his hands, and looked rather nervously around the snug little apartment. There were

lurking shadows in the corners of the room that he scarcely liked. The door opening into his little dressing-room was ajar; he got up to shut it, and turned the key in the lock with a sharp click.

"I haven't read Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing," he muttered. "I'm up to their tricks, sneaking in at doors behind a fellow's back, and flattening their white faces against window panes, and making themselves all eyes in the twilight. It's a strange thing that your generous-hearted fellow, who never did a shabby thing in his life, is capable of any meanness the moment he becomes a ghost. I'll have the gas laid on to-morrow, and engage Mrs. Malony's eldest son to sleep under the letter-box in the lobby. The youth plays popular melodies upon a piece of tissue paper and a small-tooth comb, and will be quite pleasant company."

Mr. Audley walked wearily up and down the room, trying to get rid of the time. It was no use leaving the Temple until ten o'clock, and even then he would be sure to reach the station

half an hour too early. He was tired of smoking. The soothing narcotic influence might be pleasant enough in itself, but the man must be of a singularly unsocial disposition who does not, after half a dozen lonely pipes, feel the need of some friendly companion, at whom he can stare dreamily athwart the pale grey mists, and who will stare kindly back at him in return. Do not think that Robert Audley was without friends, because he so often found himself alone in his quiet chambers. The solemn purpose which had taken so powerful a hold upon his careless life had separated him from old associations, and it was for this reason that he was alone. He had dropped away from his old friends. How could he sit amongst them, at social wine parties, perhaps, or at pleasant little dinners, that were washed down with Nonpareil and Chambertin, Pomard and Champagne? How could he sit amongst them, listening to their careless talk of politics and opera, literature and racing, theatres and science, scandal, and theology, and yet carry in his mind the horrible burden of

those dark terrors and suspicions that were with him by day and night? He could not do it! He had shrunk from these men as if he had, indeed, been a detective police officer, stained with vile associations, and unfit company for honest gentlemen. He had drawn himself away from all familiar haunts, and had shut himself in his lonely rooms with the perpetual trouble of his mind for his sole companion, until he had grown as nervous as habitual solitude will eventually make the strongest and the wisest man, however he may vaunt himself of his strength and wisdom.

The clock of the Temple Church and the clocks of St. Dunstan's, St. Clement's Danes, and a crowd of other churches, whose steeples uprear themselves above the house-tops by the river, struck ten at last, and Mr. Audley, who had put on his hat and overcoat nearly half an hour before, let himself out of the little lobby, and locked his door behind him. He mentally reiterated his determination to engage "Parthrick," as Mrs. Maloney's eldest son was called by his devoted mother. The youth should enter

upon his functions the very next night after, and if the ghost of hapless George Talboys should invade these gloomy apartments, the phantom must make its way across Patrick's body before it could reach the inner chamber in which the proprietor of the premises slept.

Do not laugh at poor Robert because he grew hypochondriacal, after hearing the horrible story of his friend's death. There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling. Mad to-day and sane to-morrow.

Who can forget that almost terrible picture of Dr. Samuel Johnson? The awful disputant of the club-room, solemn, ponderous, severe, and merciless, the admiration and the terror of humble Bozzy, the stern monitor of gentle Oliver, the friend of Garrick and Reynolds to-night: and before sunset to-morrow a weak miserable old man, discovered by good Mr. and Mrs. Thrale, kneeling upon the floor of his lonely chamber, in an agony of childish terror and confusion, and praying to a merciful God for the

preservation of his wits. I think the memory of that dreadful afternoon, and of the tender care he then received, should have taught the doctor to keep his hand steady at Streatham, when he took his bed-room candlestick, from which it was his habit to shower rivulets of molten wax upon the costly carpet of his beautiful protectress; and might have even had a more enduring effect, and taught him to be merciful, when the brewer's widow went mad in her turn, and married that dreadful creature, the Italian singer. Who has not been, or is not to be, mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?

Fleet Street was quiet and lonely at this late hour, and Robert Audley being in a ghost-seeing mood would have been scarcely astonished had he seen Johnson's set come roystering westward in the lamp-light, or blind John Milton groping his way down the steps before Saint Bride's church.

Mr. Audley hailed a hansom at the corner of Farringdon Street, and was rattled rapidly away

across tenantless Smithfield market, and into a labyrinth of dingy streets that brought him out upon the broad grandeur of Finsbury Pavement.

"Nobody ever saw a ghost in a hansom cab," Robert thought, "and even Dumas hasn't done *that* as yet. Not but that he's capable of doing it if the idea occurred to him. *Un revenant en fiacre.* Upon my word, the title doesn't sound bad. The story would be something about a dismal gentleman, in black, who took the vehicle by the hour, and was contumacious upon the subject of fares, and beguiled the driver into lonely neighbourhoods, beyond the barriers, and made himself otherwise unpleasant."

The hansom rattled up the steep and stony approach to the Shoreditch station, and deposited Robert at the doors of that unlovely temple. There were very few people going to travel by this midnight train, and Robert walked up and down the long wooden platform, reading the huge advertisements whose gaunt lettering looked wan and ghastly in the dim lamplight.

He had the carriage in which he sat all to himself. All to himself, did I say? Had he not lately summoned to his side that ghostly company which of all companionship is the most tenacious? The shadow of George Talboys pursued him, even in the comfortable first class carriage, and was behind him when he looked out of the window, and was yet far away ahead of him and the rushing engine, in that thicket towards which the train was speeding, by the side of the unhallowed hiding place in which the mortal remains of the dead man lay, neglected and uncared for.

"I must give my lost friend decent burial," Robert thought, as a chill wind swept across the flat landscape, and struck him with such frozen breath as might have emanated from the lips of the dead. "I must do it; or I shall die of some panic like this which has seized upon me to-night. I must do it; at any peril; at any cost. Even at the price of that revelation which will bring the mad woman back from her safe hiding-place, and place her in a criminal dock." He was glad

when the train stopped at Brentwood at a few minutes after twelve. Only one other person got out at the little station,—a burly grazier, who had been to one of the theatres to see a tragedy. Country people always go to see tragedies. None of your flimsy vaudevilles for them! None of your pretty drawing-room, moderator lamp and French window pieces, with a confiding husband, a frivolous wife, and a smart lady's maid, who is always accommodating enough to dust the furniture and announce visitors; no such gauzy productions; but a good monumental five act tragedy, in which their ancestors have seen Garrick and Mrs. Abington, and in which they themselves can remember the O'Neil, the beautiful creature whose lovely neck and shoulders became suffused with a crimson glow of shame and indignation, when the actress was Mrs. Beverley, and insulted by Stukeley in her poverty and sorrow. I think our modern O'Neils scarcely feel their stage wrongs so keenly; or, perhaps, those brightly indignant blushes of to-day struggle ineffectually against the new art of Madame Rachel, and are lost to

the public beneath the lily purity of priceless enamel.

Robert Audley looked hopelessly about him as he left the pleasant town of Brentwood, and descended the lonely hill into the valley which lay between the town he had left behind him and that other hill, upon which that frail and dismal tenement—the Castle Inn—had so long struggled with its enemy, the wind, only to succumb at last, and to be shrivelled and consumed away like a withered leaf, by the alliance of that old adversary with a newer and a fiercer foe.

"It's a dreary walk," Mr. Audley said, as he looked along the smooth high road that lay before him, lonely as the track across a desert. "It's a dreary walk for a dismal wretch to take between twelve and one, upon a cheerless March night, with not so much moonlight in all the black sky as might serve to convince one of the existence of such a luminary. But I'm very glad I came," thought the barrister, "if this poor creature is dying, and really wishes to see me. I should have been a wretch had I held back.

Besides, *she* wishes it; she wishes it; and what can I do but obey her, Heaven help me!"

He stopped by the wooden fence which surrounded the gardens of Mount Stanning rectory, and looked across a laurel hedge towards the lattice windows of that simple habitation. There was no glimmer of light in any one of these windows, and Mr. Audley was fain to go away, after having had no better satisfaction than such cold comfort as was to be obtained from a long lingering contemplation of the house that sheltered the one woman before whose invincible power the impregnable fortress of his heart had surrendered. Only a heap of blackened ruins stood upon the spot on which the Castle Inn had once done battle with the winds fo Heaven. The cold night breezes had their way with the few fragments that the fire had left, and whirled them hither and thither as they would, scattering a shower of dust and cinders and crumbling morsels of charred wood upon Robert Audley as he passed.

It was half-past one o'clock when the night

wanderer entered the village of Audley, and it was only there that he remembered that Clara Talboys had omitted to give him any direction by which he might find the cottage in which Luke Marks lay.

"It was Dawson who recommended that the poor creature should be taken to his mother's cottage," Robert thought, by-and-by, "and I dare say, Dawson has attended him ever since the fire. He'll be able to tell me the way to the cottage."

Acting upon this idea, Mr. Audley stopped at the house in which Helen Talboys had lived before her second marriage. The door of the little surgery was ajar, and there was a light burning within. Robert pushed the doo open and peeped in. The surgeon was standing at the mahogany counter, mixing a draught in a glass measure, with his hat close beside him. Late as it was, he had evidently only just come in. The harmonious snoring of his assistant sounded from a little room within the surgery.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mr. Dawson,"

Robert said, apologetically, as the surgeon looked up and recognised him, "but I have come down to see Marks, who, I hear, is in a very bad way, and I want you to tell me the way to his mother's cottage."

"I'll show you the way, Mr. Audley," answered the surgeon, "I am going there this minute."

"The man is very bad then?"

"So bad that he can be no worse. The only change that can happen is that change which will take him beyond the reach of any earthly suffering."

"Strange!" exclaimed Robert. "He did not appear to be much burnt."

"He was not much burnt. Had he been, I should never have recommended his being removed from Mount Stanning. It is the shock that has done the business. His health had been long undermined by habits of intoxication, and has completely given way under the sudden terror of that night. He has been in a raging fever for the last two days; but to-night he is

much calmer, and I'm afraid, before to-morrow night, we shall have seen the last of him."

"He has asked to see me, I am told," said Mr. Audley.

"Yes," answered the surgeon, carelessly. "A sick man's fancy, no doubt. You dragged him out of the house, and did your best to save his life. I dare say, rough and boorish as the poor fellow is, he thinks a good deal of that."

They had left the surgery, the door of which Mr. Dawson had locked behind him. There was money in the till, perhaps, for surely the village apothecary could not have feared that the most daring housebreaker would imperil his liberty in the pursuit of blue pill and colocynth, or salts and senna.

The surgeon led the way along the silent street, and presently turned into a lane at the end of which Robert Audley saw the wan glimmer of a light. A light which told of the watch that is kept by the sick and dying; a pale, melancholy light, which always has a dismal aspect when looked upon in this silent hour

betwixt night and morning. It shone from the window of the cottage in which Luke Marks lay, watched by his wife and mother.

Mr. Dawson lifted the latch, and walked into the common room of the little tenement, followed by Robert Audley. It was empty, but a feeble tallow candle, with a broken back and a long, cauliflower-headed wick sputtered upon the table. The sick man lay in the room above.

"Shall I tell him you are here?" asked Mr. Dawson.

"Yes, yes, if you please. But be cautious how you tell him, if you think the news likely to agitate him. I am in no hurry. I can wait. You can call me when you think I can safely come up-stairs."

The surgeon nodded, and softly ascended the narrow wooden stairs leading to the upper chamber. Mr. Dawson was a good man, and indeed a parish surgeon has need to be good, and tender, and kindly, and gentle, or the wretched patients who have no neatly folded fees of gold

and silver to offer, may suffer petty slights and insignificant cruelties, not easily to be proved before a board of well-to-do poor-law guardians, but not the less bitter to bear in the fretful and feverish hours of sickness and pain.

Robert Audley seated himself in a Windsor chair, by the cold hearth-stone, and stared disconsolately about him. Small as the room was, the corners were dusky and shadowy in the dim light of the cauliflower-headed candle. The faded face of an eight-day clock, which stood opposite Robert Audley, seemed to stare him out of countenance. The awful sounds which can emanate from eight-day clocks after midnight are too generally known to need description. The young man listened in awe-stricken silence to the heavy, monotonous ticking, which sounded as if the clock had been counting out the seconds which yet remained for the dying man, and checking them off with gloomy satisfaction. "Another minute gone! another minute gone! another minute gone!" the clock seemed to say, until Mr. Audley felt inclined to throw his hat

at it, in the wild hope of stopping that melancholy and monotonous noise.

But he was relieved at last by the low voice of the surgeon, who looked down from the top of the little staircase to tell him that Luke Marks was awake and would be glad to see him.

Robert immediately obeyed this summons. He crept softly up the stairs and took off his hat before he bent his head to enter at the low doorway of the humble rustic chamber. He took off his hat in the presence of this common peasant-man because he knew that there was another and a more awful presence hovering about the room, and eager to be admitted.

Phœbe Marks was sitting at the foot of the bed, with her eyes fixed upon her husband's face. Not with any very tender expression in their pale light, but with a sharp, terrified anxiety, which showed that it was the coming of death itself that she dreaded, rather than the loss of her husband. The old woman was busy at the fire-place, airing linen, and preparing some mess of broth which it was not likely the patient

would ever eat. The sick man lay with his head propped up by pillows, his coarse face deadly pale, and his great hands wandering uneasily about the coverlet. Phœbe had been reading to him, for an open Testament lay amongst the medicine and lotion bottles upon the table near the bed. Every object in the room was neat and orderly, and bore witness of that delicate precision which had always been a distinguishing characteristic of Phœbe.

The young woman rose as Robert Audley crossed the threshold, and hurried towards him.

"Let me speak to you for a moment, sir, before you talk to Luke," she said, in an eager whisper. "Pray let me speak to you first."

"What's the gal a sayin', there?" asked the invalid in a subdued roar, which died away hoarsely on his lips. He was feebly savage, even in his weakness. The dull glaze of death was gathering over his eyes, but they still watched Phœbe with a sharp glance of dissatisfaction. "What's she up to there?" he said. "I won't have no plottin' and no hatchin' agen me: I

want to speak to Mr. Audley my own self; and whatever I done I'm a goin' to answer for. If I done any mischief, I'm a goin' to try and undo it. What's she a sayin'?"

"She ain't a sayin' nothin', lovey," answered the old woman, going to the bed-side of her son, who, even when made more interesting than usual by illness, did not seem a very fit subject for this tender appellation.

"She's only a tellin' the gentleman how bad you've been, my pretty."

"What I'm a goin' to tell I'm only a goin' to tell to him, remember," growled Mr. Marks; "and ketch me a tellin' of it to him if it warn't for what he done for me the other night."

"To be sure not, lovey," answered the old woman, soothingly.

Her intellect was rather limited in its scope, and she attached no more importance to her son's eager words now, than she had attached to the wild ravings of delirium. That horrible delirium in which Luke had described himself as being dragged through miles of blazing brick and

mortar: and flung down wells; and dragged out of deep pits by the hair of the head; and suspended in the air by giant hands that came out of the clouds to pluck him from off the solid earth and hurl him into chaos; with many other wild terrors and delusions which ran riot in his distempered brain.

Phœbe Marks had drawn Mr. Audley out of the room and on to the narrow landing at the top of the little staircase. This landing was a platform of about three feet square, and it was as much as the two could manage to stand upon it without pushing each other against the whitewashed wall, or backwards down the stairs.

"Oh, sir, I wanted to speak to you so badly," Phœbe whispered eagerly; "you know what I told you when I found you safe and well upon the night of the fire?"

"Yes, yes."

"I told you what I suspected; what I think still."

"Yes, I remember."

"But I never breathed a word of it to anybody

but you, sir; and I think that Luke has forgotten all about that night; I think that what went before the fire has gone clean out of his head altogether. He was tipsy you know when my la—when she came to the Castle; and I think he was so dazed and scared like by the fire that it all went out of his memory. He doesn't suspect what I suspect at any rate, or he'd have spoken of it to anybody and everybody; but he's dreadful spiteful against my lady, for he says if she'd have let him have a place at Brentwood or Chelmsford, this wouldn't have happened. So what I wanted to beg of you, sir, is not to let a word drop before Luke."

"Yes, yes, I understand; I will be careful."

"My lady has left the Court, I hear, sir?"

"Yes."

"Never to come back, sir?"

"Never to come back."

"But she has not gone where she'll be cruelly treated; where she'll be ill-used?"

"No, she will be very kindly treated."

"I'm glad of that, sir; I beg your pardon for

troubling you with the question, sir, but my lady was a kind mistress to me."

Luke's voice, husky and feeble, was heard within the little chamber at this period of the conversation, demanding angrily when "that gal would have done jawing," upon which Phœbe put her finger to her lips, and led Mr. Audley back into the sick room.

"I don't want *you*," said Mr. Marks, decisively, as his wife re-entered the chamber, "I don't want *you*, you've no call to hear what I've got to say; I only want Mr. Audley, and I wants to speak to him all alone, with none o' your sneakin' listenin' at doors, d'ye hear, so you may go down stairs and keep there till you're wanted; and you may take mother—no, mother may stay, I shall want her presently."

The sick man's feeble hand pointed to the door, through which his wife departed very submissively.

"I've no wish to hear anything, Luke," she said, "but I hope you won't say anything against those that have been good and generous to you."

"I shall say what I like," answered Mr. Marks, fiercely, "and I'm not agoin' to be ordered by you. You ain't the parson, as I've ever heerd of; nor the lawyer neither."

The landlord of the Castle inn had undergone no moral transformation by his death-bed sufferings, fierce and rapid as they had been. Perhaps some faint glimmer of a light that had been far off from his life, now struggled feebly through the black obscurities of ignorance that darkened his soul. Perhaps a half angry, half sullen penitence urged him to make some rugged effort to atone for a life that had been selfish and drunken and wicked. Be it how it might, he wiped his white lips, and turning his haggard eyes earnestly upon Robert Audley, pointed to a chair by the bedside.

"You've made game of me in a general way, Mr. Audley," he said, presently, "and you've drawed me out, and you've tumbled and tossed me about like in a gentlemanly way, till I was nothink or anythink in your hands; and you've looked me through and through, and turned me

inside out till you thought you knowed as much as I knowed. I'd no particular call to be grateful to you, not before the fire at the Castle t'other night. But I am grateful to you for that. I'm not grateful to folks in a general way, p'raps, because the things as gentlefolks have give me have a'most allus been the very things I didn't want. They've give me soup, and tracks, and flannel, and coals; but, Lord, they've made such a precious noise about it that I'd have been glad to send 'em all back to 'em. But when a gentleman goes and puts his own life in danger to save a drunken brute like me, the drunkenest brute as ever was feels grateful like to that gentleman, and wishes to say before he dies—which he sees in the doctor's face as he ain't got long to live—'Thank ye, sir, I'm obliged to you.'"

Luke Marks stretched out his left hand—the right had been injured by the fire, and was wrapped in linen—and groped feebly for that of Mr. Robert Audley.

The young man took the coarse but shrunken hand in both his own, and pressed it cordially.

"I need no thanks, Luke Marks," he said, "I was very glad to be of service to you."

Mr. Marks did not speak immediately. He was lying quietly upon his side, staring reflectingly at Robert Audley.

"You was oncommon fond of that gent as disappeared at the Court, warn't you, sir," he said at last.

Robert started at the mention of his dead friend.

"You was oncommon fond of this Mr. Talboys, I've heerd say, sir," repeated Luke.

"Yes, yes," answered Robert, rather impatiently, "he was my very dear friend.

"I've heerd the servants at the Court say how you took on when you couldn't find him. I've heerd the landlord of the Sun Inn say how cut up you was when you first missed him. 'If the two gents had been brothers,' the landlord said, 'our gent,' meanin' you, sir, 'couldn't have been more cut up when he missed the other.'"

"Yes, yes, I know. I know," said Robert;

"pray do not speak any more of this subject; I cannot tell you how much it distresses me."

Was he to be haunted for ever by the ghost of his unburied friend? He came here to comfort this sick man, and even here he was pursued by that relentless shadow; even here he was reminded of the secret crime which had darkened his life.

"Listen to me, Marks," he said, earnestly; "believe me, that I appreciate your grateful words, and that I am very glad to have been of service to you. But before you say anything more, let me make one most solemn request. If you have sent for me that you may tell me anything of the fate of my lost friend, I entreat you to spare yourself and to spare me that horrible story. You can tell me nothing which I do not already know. The worst you can tell me of the woman who was once in your power, has already been revealed to me by her own lips. Pray then be silent upon this subject; I say again, you can tell me nothing which I do not know."

Luke Marks looked musingly at the earnest face of his visitor, and some shadowy expression

which was almost like a smile flitted feebly across the sick man's haggard features.

"I can't tell you nothin' you don't know?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Then it ain't no good for me to try," said the invalid, thoughtfully. "Did *she* tell you?" he asked after a pause.

"I must beg, Marks, that you will drop the subject," Robert answered, almost sternly, "I have already told you that I do not wish to hear it spoken of. Whatever discoveries you made, you made your market out of them. Whatever guilty secrets you got possession of, you were paid for keeping silence. You had better keep silence to the end."

"Had I?" cried Luke Marks in an eager whisper. "Had I really now better hold my tongue to the last?"

"I think so, most decidedly. You traded on your secret, and you were paid to keep it. It would be more honest to hold to your bargain, and keep it still."

"Would it now?" said Mr. Marks with a ghastly grin; "but suppose my lady had one secret and I another. How then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose I could have told something all along; and would have told it, perhaps, if I'd been a little better treated; if what was give to me had been give a little more liberal like, and not flung at me as if I was a dog, and was only give it to be kep' from bitin'. Suppose I could have told somethin', and would have told it but for that? How then?"

It is impossible to describe the ghastliness of the triumphant grin that lighted up the sick man's haggard face.

"His mind is wandering," Robert thought, "I had need be patient with him, poor fellow. It would be strange if I could not be patient with a dying man."

Luke Marks lay staring at Mr. Audley for some moments with that triumphant grin upon his face. The old woman, wearied out with watching her dying son, had dropped into a doze,

and sat nodding her sharp chin over the handful of fire, upon which the broth that was never to be eaten, still bubbled and simmered.

Mr. Audley waited very patiently until it should be the sick man's pleasure to speak Every sound was painfully distinct in that dead hour of the night. The dropping of the ashes on the hearth, the ominous crackling of the burning coals, the slow and ponderous ticking of the sulky clock in the room below, the low moaning of the March wind (which might have been the voice of an English Banshee, screaming her dismal warning to the watchers of the dying), the hoarse breathing of the sick man—every sound held itself apart from all other sounds, and made itself into a separate voice, loud with a gloomy portent in the solemn stillness of the house.

Robert sat with his face shaded by his hands, thinking what was to become of him now that the secret of his friend's fate had been told, and the dark story of George Talboys and his wicked wife had been finished in the Belgian mad-house What was to become of him ?

He had no claim upon Clara Talboys; for he had resolved to keep the horrible secret that had been told to him. How then could he dare to meet her with that secret held back from her? How could he ever look into her earnest eyes, and yet withhold the truth? He felt that all power of reservation would fail before the searching glance of those calm brown eyes. If he was indeed to keep this secret he must never see her again. To reveal it would be to embitter her life. Could he, for any selfish motive of his own, tell her this terrible story?—or could he think that if he told her she would suffer her murdered brother to lie unavenged and forgotten in his unhallowed grave?

Hemmed in on every side by difficulties which seemed utterly insurmountable; with the easy temperament which was natural to him embittered by the gloomy burden he had borne so long, Robert Audley looked hopelessly forward to the life which lay before him, and thought that it would have been better for him had he perished among the burning ruins of the Castle Inn.

"Who would have been sorry for me? No one but my poor little Alicia," he thought, "and hers would have only been an April sorrow. Would Clara Talboys have been sorry? No! She would have only regretted me as a lost link in the mystery of her brother's death. She would only—"

CHAPTER VIII.

THAT WHICH THE DYING MAN HAD TO TELL.

HEAVEN knows whither Mr. Audley's thoughts might have wandered had he not been startled by a sudden movement of the sick man, who raised himself up in his bed, and called to his mother.

The old woman woke up with a jerk, and turned sleepily enough to look at her son.

"What is it, Luke, deary?" she asked soothingly. "It ain't time for the doctor's stuff yet. Mr. Dawson said as you weren't to have it till two hours after he went away, and he ain't been gone an hour yet."

"Who said it was the doctor's stuff I wanted?" cried Mr. Marks, impatiently. "I want to ask you something, mother. Do you remember the seventh of last September?"

Robert started, and looked eagerly at the sick man. Why did he harp upon this forbidden subject? Why did he insist upon recalling the

date of George's murder? The old woman shook her head in feeble confusion of mind.

"Lord, Luke," she said, "how can'ee ask me such questions? My memory's been a failin' me this eight or nine year; and I never was one to remember the days of the month, or aught o' that sort. How should a poor workin' woman remember such things."

Luke Marks shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"You're a good un to do what's asked you, mother," he said, peevishly. "Didn't I tell you to remember that day? Didn't I tell you as the time might come when you'd be called upon to bear witness about it, and put upon your Bible oath about it? Didn't I tell you that, mother?"

The old woman shook her head hopelessly.

"If you say so, I make no doubt you did, Luke," she said, with a conciliatory smile; "but I can't call it to mind, lovey. My memory's been failin' me this nine year, sir," she added, turning to Robert Audley, "and I'm but a poor crittur."

Mr. Audley laid his hand upon the sick man's arm?

"Marks," he said, "I tell you again, you have no cause to worry yourself about this matter. I ask you no questions, I have no wish to hear anything."

"But suppose I want to tell somethin'," cried Luke, with feverish energy, "suppose I feel that I can't die with a secret on my mind, and have asked to see you on purpose that I might tell you; Suppose that, and you'll suppose nothing but the truth. I'd have been burnt alive before I'd have told *her*," he spoke these words between his set teeth, and scowled savagely as he uttered them. "I'd have been burnt alive first. I made her pay for her pretty insolent ways; I made her pay for her airs and graces; I'd never have told her—never, never! I had my power over her, and I kept it; I had my secret, and I was paid for it; and there wasn't a petty slight as she ever put upon me or mine that I didn't pay her out for twenty times over!"

"Marks, Marks, for heaven's sake be calm," said Robert, earnestly; "what are you talking of? What is it that you could have told?"

"I'm agoin' to tell you," answered Luke, wiping his dry lips. "Give us a drink, mother."

The old woman poured out some cooling drink into a mug, and carried it to her son.

He drank it in an eager hurry, as if he felt that the brief remainder of his life must be a race with the pitiless pedestrian, Time.

"Stop where you are," he said to his mother, pointing to a chair at the foot of the bed.

The old woman obeyed, and seated herself meekly opposite to Mr. Audley. She took out her spectacle case, polished her spectacles, put them on and beamed placidly upon her son, as if she cherished some faint hope that her memory might be assisted by this process.

"I'll ask you another question, mother," said Luke, "and I think it'll be strange if you can't answer it. Do you remember when I was at work upon Atkinson's farm; before I was married, you know, and when I was livin' down here along of you?"

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Marks answered, nodding triumphantly, "I remember that, my dear. It

were last fall, just about as the apples was bein' gathered in the orchard across our lane, and about the time as you had your new sprigged wesket. I remember, Luke, I remember."

Mr. Audley wondered where all this was to lead to, and how long he would have to sit by the sick man's bed hearing a conversation that had no meaning to him.

"If you remember that much, maybe you'll remember more, mother," said Luke. "Can you call to mind my bringing some one home here one night, while Atkinsons was stackin' the last o' their corn?"

Once more Mr. Audley started violently, and this time he looked up earnestly at the face of the speaker, and listened, with a strange, breathless interest, that he scarcely understood himself, to what Luke Marks was saying.

"I rek'lect your bringin' home Phœbe,' the old woman answered with great animation, "I rek'lect your bringin' Phœbe home to take a cup o' tea, or a little snack o' supper, a mort o' times."

"Bother Phœbe," cried Mr. Marks, "whose a talkin' of Phœbe? what's Phœbe that anybody should go to put theirselves out about her? Do you remember my bringin' home a gentleman arter ten o'clock one September night; a gentleman as was wet through to the skin, and was covered with mud and slush, and green slime and black muck, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, and had his arm broke, and his shoulder swelled up awful; and was such a objeck that nobody would ha' knowed him. A gentleman as had to have his clothes cut off him in some places, and as sat by the kitchen fire, starin' at the coals as if he'd gone mad or stupid-like, and didn't know where he was, or who he was: and as had to be cared for like a baby, and dressed and dried, and washed, and fed with spoonfuls of brandy that had to be forced between his locked teeth, before any life could be got into him. Do you remember that, mother?"

The old woman nodded, and muttered something, to the effect that she remembered all

these circumstances most vividly, now that Luke happened to mention them.

Robert Audley uttered a wild cry, and fell down upon his knees by the side of the sick man's bed.

"My God!" he ejaculated, "I thank Thee for Thy wondrous mercies. George Talboys is alive!"

"Wait a bit," said Mr. Marks, "don't you be too fast. Mother, give us down that tin-box on the shelf over against the chest of drawers, will you?"

The old woman obeyed, and after fumbling amongst broken tea-cups and milk-jugs, lidless wooden cotton-boxes, and a miscellaneous litter of rags and crockery, produced a tin snuff-box with a sliding lid; a shabby, dirty looking box enough.

Robert Audley still knelt by the bed-side with his face hidden by his clasped hands. Luke Marks opened the tin box.

"There ain't no money in it, more's the pity," he said, "or if there had been it wouldn't have been let stop very long. But there's summat in it that perhaps you'll think quite as vallible as money, and that's what I'm goin' to

give you as a proof that a drunken brute can feel thankful to them as is kind to him."

He took out two folded papers, which he gave into Robert Audley's hands.

They were two leaves torn out of a pocket-book, and they were written upon in pencil, and in a hand-writing that was quite strange to Mr. Audley. A cramped, stiff and yet scrawling hand, such as some ploughman might have written.

"I don't know this writing," Robert said, as he eagerly unfolded the first of the two papers, "What has this to do with my friend? Why do you show me these?"

"Suppose you read 'em first," said Mr. Marks, "and ask me questions about 'em afterwards."

The first paper which Robert Audley had unfolded contained the following lines, written in that cramped, yet scrawling hand which was so strange to him.

"My dear friend,—I write to you in such utter confusion of mind as perhaps no man ever before suffered. I cannot tell you what has happened

to me, I can only tell you that something has happened which will drive me from England, a broken-hearted man, to seek some corner of the earth in which I may live and die unknown and forgotten. I can only ask you to forget me. If your friendship could have done me any good, I would have appealed to it. If your counsel could have been of any help to me, I would have confided in you. But neither friendship nor counsel can help me; and all I can say to you is this, God bless you for the past, and teach you to forget me, in the future. G. T."

The second paper was addressed to another person, and its contents were briefer than those of the first.

"Helen,—May God pity and forgive you for that which you have done to-day, as truly as I do. Rest in peace. You shall never hear of me again; to you and to the world, I shall henceforth be that which you wished me to be to-day. You need fear no molestation from me. I leave England, never to return. "G. T."

Robert Audley sat staring at these lines in

hopeless bewilderment. They were not in his friend's familiar hand; and yet they purported to be written by him, and were signed with his initials.

He looked scrutinisingly at the face of Luke Marks, thinking that perhaps some trick was being played upon him.

"This was not written by George Talboys," he said.

"It was," answered Luke Marks, "it was written by Mr. Talboys, every line of it; he wrote it with his own hand; but it was his left hand, for he could'nt use his right because of his broken arm."

Robert Audley looked up suddenly, and the shadow of suspicion passed away from his face.

"I understand," he said, "I understand. Tell me all; tell me how it was that my poor friend was saved."

He could scarcely realise to himself yet that what he had heard could be true. He could scarcely believe that this friend whom he had so bitterly regretted might still clasp him by the hand in a happy future, when the darkness of the

past should have cleared away. He was dazed and bewildered at first, and not able to understand this new hope which had dawned so suddenly upon him.

"Tell me all," he cried, "for mercy's sake tell me everything, and let me try to understand it if I can."

"I was at work up at Atkinson's farm last September," said Luke Marks, "helpin' to stack the last o' the corn, and as the nighest way from the farm to mother's cottage was through the meadows at the back o' the Court, I used to come that way; and Phœbe used to stand at the gate in the garden wall beyond the lime-walk, sometimes, to have a chat with me, knowin' my time o' comin' home. Sometimes she wouldn't be there, and sometimes I've leapt the dry moat as parts the kitchen gardens from the meadows alongside of 'em, and have dropped in at the servants' hall to have a glass of ale or a bit o' supper, as it might be.

"I don't know what Phœbe was a doin' upon the evenin' of the seventh o' September—I rek'lect the date because Farmer Atkinson paid me my

wages all of a lump on that day, and I'd had to sign a bit of a receipt for the money he give me—I don't know what she was a doin,' but she warn't at the gate agen the lime-walk, so I went round to the other side o' the gardens and jumped across the dry ditch; for I wanted partic'ler to see her that night, as I was goin' away to work upon a farm beyond Chelmsford the next day. Audley church clock struck nine as I was crossin' the meadows between Atkinson's and the Court, and it must have been about a quarter past nine when I got into the kitchen garden.

"I crossed the garden, and went into the lime-walk; the nighest way to the servants' hall took me through the shrubbery and past the dry well. It was a dark night, but I knew my way well enough about the old place, and the light in the window of the servants' hall looked red and comfortable through the darkness. I was close against the mouth of the dry well when I heard a sound that made my blood creep. It was a groan; a groan of a man in pain, as was lyin' somewhere hid among the bushes. I warn't afraid

of ghosts, and I warn't afraid of anythink in a general way, but there was somethin' in hearin' this groan as chilled me to the very heart, and for a minute I was struck all of a heap and didn't know what to do. But I heard the groan again, and then I began to search amongst the bushes. I found a man lyin' hidden under a lot o' laurels, and I thought at first he was up to no good, and I was a goin' to collar him and take him to the house, when he caught me by the wrist without gettin' up from the ground, but lookin' 'at me very earnest, as I could see by the way his face was turned towards me in the darkness, and asked me who I was, and what I was, and what I had to do with the folks at the Court.

"There was somethin' in the way he spoke that told me he was a gentleman, though I didn't know him from Adam, and couldn't see his face; and I answered his questions civil.

"'I want to get away from this place,' he said, 'without bein' seen by any livin' creetur, remember that. I've been lyin' here ever since

four o'clock to-day, and I'm half dead, but I want to get away without bein' seen, mind that.'

"I told him that was easy enough, but I began to think my first thoughts of him might have been right enough after all, and that he couldn't have been up to no good to want to sneak away so precious quiet.

"'Can you take me to any place where I can get a change of dry clothes,' he says, 'without half a dozen people knowin' it.'

"He'd got up into a sittin' attitude by this time, and I could see that his right arm hung loose by his side, and that he was in pain.

"I pointed to his arm, and asked him what was the matter with it; but he only answered very quiet like, 'Broken, my lad, broken. Not that that's much,' he says in another tone, speaking to himself like more, than to me. 'There's broken hearts as well as broken limbs, and they're not so easy mended.'

"I told him I could take him to mother's cottage, and that he could dry his clothes there and welcome.

"'Can your mother keep a secret?' he asked.

"'Well she could keep one well enough, if she could remember it,' I told him; 'but you might tell her the secrets of all the Freemasons, and Foresters, and Buffalers, and Oddfellers as ever was, to-night; and she'd have forgotten all about 'em to-morrow mornin'.'

"He seemed satisfied with this, and he got himself up by holdin' on to me, for it seemed as if his limbs was so cramped, the use of 'em was almost gone. I felt as he came agen me, that his clothes was wet and mucky.

"'You haven't been and fell into the fish-pond, have you, sir?' I asked.

"He made no answer to my question; he didn't seem even to have heard it. I could see now he was standin' upon his feet that he was a tall, fine made man, a head and shoulders higher than me.

"'Take me to your mother's cottage,' he said, 'and get me some dry clothes if you can; I'll pay you well for your trouble.'

"I knew that the key was mostly left in the

wooden gate in the garden wall, so I led him that way. He could scarcely walk at first, and it was only by leanin' heavily upon my shoulder that he managed to get along. I got him through the gate, leavin' it unlocked behind me, and trustin' to the chance of that not bein' noticed by the under-gardener, who had the care of the key, and was a careless chap enough. I took him across the meadows, and brought him up here, still keepin' away from the village, and in the fields, where there wasn't a creature to see us at that time o' night; and so I got him into the room down-stairs, where mother was a sittin' over the fire gettin' my bit o' supper ready for me.

"I put the strange chap in a chair agen the fire, and then for the first time I had a good look at him. I never see anybody in such a state before. He was all over green damp and muck, and his hands was scratched and cut to pieces. I got his clothes off him how I could, for he was like a child in my hands, and sat starin' at the fire as helpless as any baby; only givin' a long heavy sigh now and then, as if his heart was

a goin' to bust. He didn't seem to know where he was; he didn't seem to hear us nor to see us; he only sat starin' straight before him, with his poor broken arm hanging loose by his side.

"Thinkin' he was in a very bad way, I wanted to go and fetch Mr. Dawson to him, and I said somethin' about it to mother. But queer as he seemed in his mind, he looked up quickly, as sharp as possible, and said No, No; nobody was to know of his bein' there except us two.

"I asked if I should run and fetch a drop of brandy; and he said, yes, I might do that. It was close upon eleven o'clock when I went into the public-house, and it was strikin' eleven as I got back home.

"It was a good thing I'd fetched the brandy, for he was shiverin' awful, and the edge of the mug rattled against his teeth. I had to force the spirit between 'em, they were so tight locked, before he could drink it. At last he dropped into a kind of a dose, a stupid sort of sleep, and began to nod over the fire, so I ran and got a blanket and wrapped him in it, and got him to lie down upon

the press bedstead in the room under this. I sent mother to bed, and I sat by the fire and watched him, and kep' the fire up till it was just upon daybreak, when he 'woke up all of a sudden with a start, and said he must go, directly minute.

"I begged him not to think of such a thing, and told him he warn't fit to move for ever so long; but he said he must go, and he got up, and though he staggered like, and at first could hardly stand steady two minutes together, he wouldn't be beat, and he got me to dress him in his clothes as I'd dried and cleaned as well as I could while he laid asleep. I did manage it at last, but the clothes was awful spoiled, and he looked a dreadful objeck, with his pale face and a great cut on his forehead that I'd washed and tied up with a handkercher. He could only get his coat on by buttoning on it round his neck, for he couldn't put a sleeve upon his broken arm. But he held out agen everything, though he groaned every now and then; and what with the scratches and bruises on his hands, and the cut upon his forehead and his stiff limbs and his broken arm he'd plenty of call to

groan; and by the time it was broad daylight he was dressed and ready to go.

"'What's the nearest town to this upon the London road?' he asked me.

"I told him as the nighest town was Brentwood.

"'Very well then,' he says, 'if you'll go with me to Brentwood, and take me to some surgeon as 'll set my arm, I'll give you a five pound note for that and all your other trouble.'

"I told him that I was ready and willin' to do anything as he wanted done; and asked him if I shouldn't go and see if I could borrow a cart from some of the neighbours to drive him over in, for I told him it was a good six miles' walk.

"He shook his head, No, no, no, he said, he didn't want anybody to know anything about him; he'd rather walk it.

"He did walk it; and he walked it like a good un too; though I know as every step he took o' them six mile he took in pain; but he held out as he'd held out before; I never see such a chap to hold out in all my blessed life. He had to stop sometimes and lean agen a gateway to get his

breath; but he held out still, till at last we got into Brentwood, and then he says 'Take me to the nighest surgeon's', and I took him, and I waited while he had his arm set in splints, which took a precious long time. The surgeon wanted him to stay in Brentwood till he was better, but he said it warn't to be heard on, he must get up to London without a minute's loss of time; so the surgeon made him as comfortable as he could, considerin', and tied up his arm in a sling."

Robert Audley started. A circumstance connected with his visit to Liverpool flashed suddenly back upon his memory. He remembered the clerk who had called him back to say that there was a passenger who took his berth on board the *Victoria Regia* within an hour or so of the vessel's sailing; a young man with his arm in a sling, who had called himself by some common name, which Robert had forgotten.

"When his arm was dressed," continued Luke, "he says to the surgeon, can you give me a pencil to write something before I go away. The surgeon smiles and shakes his head, 'You'll never be

able to write with that there hand to-day,' he says, pointin' to the arm as had just been dressed. 'P'raps not,' the young chap answers quiet enough, 'but I can write with the other.' 'Can't *I* write it for you?' says the surgeon. 'No thank you,' answers the other, 'what I've got to write is private. If you can give me a couple of envelopes I'll be obliged to you.'

"With that the surgeon goes to fetch the envelopes, and the young chap takes a pocket-book out of his coat pocket with his left hand; the cover was wet and dirty, but the inside was clean enough, and he tears out a couple of leaves and begins to write upon 'em as you see; and he writes dreadful awk'ard with his left hand, and he writes slow, but he contrives to finish what you see, and then he puts the two bits o' writin' into the envelopes as the surgeon brings him, and he seals 'em up, and he puts a pencil cross upon one of 'em, and nothin' on the other; and then he pays the surgeon for his trouble; and the surgeon says, ain't there nothin' more he can do for him, and can't he persuade him to stay in Brent-

wood till his arm's better; but he says no, no, it ain't possible; and then he says to me, 'Come along o' me to the railway-station and I'll give you what I've promised.'

"So I went to the station with him. We was in time to catch the train as stops at Brentwood at half-after eight, and we had five minutes to spare. So he takes me into a corner of the platform, and he says: 'I wants you to deliver these here letters for me,' which I told him I was willin'. 'Very well, then,' he says, 'look here, you know Audley Court?' 'Yes,' I says, 'I ought to, for my sweetheart lives lady's-maid there.' 'Whose lady's-maid?' he says. So I tells him 'My lady's, the new lady what was governess at Mr. Dawson's.' 'Very well, then,' he says, 'this here letter with the cross upon the envelope is for Lady Audley, but you're to be sure to give it into her own hands; and remember to take care as nobody sees you give it.' I promises to do this, and he hands me the first letter. And then he says, 'Do you know Mr. Audley, as is nevy to Sir Michael?' and I said, 'Yes, I've

heerd tell on him, and I'd heerd as he was a reg'lar swell, but affable and free spoken' (for I had heerd tell on you, you know)," Luke added parenthetically. "'Now look here,' the young chap says, 'You're to give this other letter to Mr. Robert Audley, whose a stayin' at the Sun Inn, in the village;' and I tells him it's all right, as I've know'd the Sun ever since I was a baby. So then he gives me the second letter, what's got nothink wrote upon the envelope, and he gives me a five-pound note, accordin' to promise; and then he says 'Good day, and thank you for all your trouble,' and he gets into a second-class carriage, and the last I sees of him is a face as white as a sheet of writin' paper, and a great patch of stickin' plaster criss-crossed upon his forehead."

"Poor George! poor George!"

"I went back to Audley, and I went straight to the Sun Inn, and asked for you, meanin' to deliver both letters faithful, so help me God, then; but the landlord told me as you'd started off that mornin' for London, and he didn't know when you'd come back, and he didn't know the name

o' the place where you lived in London, though he said he thought it was in one o' them Law Courts, such as Westminster Hall or Doctors' Commons, or somethin' like that. So what was I to do? I couldn't send the letter by post, not knowin' where to direct to, and I couldn't give it into your own hands, and I'd been told partikler not to let anybody else know of it; so I'd nothin' to do but to wait and see if you come back, and bide my time for givin' of it to you.

"I thought I'd go over to the Court in the evenin' and see Phœbe, and find out from her when there'd be a chance of my seein' her lady, for I know'd she could manage it if she liked. So I didn't go to work that day, though I ought to ha' done, and I lounged and idled about until it was nigh upon dusk, and then I goes down to the meadows behind the Court, and there I finds Phœbe sure enough waitin' agen the wooden door in the wall, on the look-out for me.

"Well I went into the shrubbery with her, and I was a turnin' towards the old well, for we'd been in the habit of sittin' upon the brickwork

about it often of a summer's evening, but Phœbe comes over as pale as a ghost all of a sudden, and says, 'Not there! not there!' So I asks, 'Why not there?' and she answers 'as she don't know, but she feels nervous like this evenin', and she's heerd as the well's haunted. I tells her as that's all a pack o'gammon, but she says, whether it is, or whether it isn't, she won't go agen the well. So we goes back to the gate, and she leans upon it talkin' to me.

"I hadn't been talkin' to her long before I see there was somethink wrong with her, and I told her as much.

"'Well,' she says, 'I ain't quite myself this evenin', for I had a upset, yesterday, and I ain't got over it yet.'"

"'A upset,' I says. 'You had a quarrel with your missus, I suppose."

"She didn't answer me directly, but she smiled the queerest smile as ever I see, and presently she says,

"'No, Luke, it weren't nothin' o' that kind; and what's more, nobody could be friendlier towards me

than my lady; I think she'd do anythink for me a'most, and I think whether it was a bit o' farming stock and furniture or such like, or whether it was the goodwill of a public-house, she wouldn't refuse me anythink as I asked her.'

"I couldn't make out this, for it was only a few days before, as she'd told me her missus was selfish and extravagant, and we might wait a long time before we could get what we wanted from her.

"So I says to her, 'Why, this is rather sudden like, Phœbe,' and she says, 'Yes, it is sudden;' and she smiles again, just the same sort of smile as before. Upon that I turns round upon her sharp, and says,

"'I'll tell you what it is, my gal, you're a keepin' somethink from me; somethink you've been told, or somethink you've found out; and if you think you're a goin' to try that game on with me, you'll find you're very much mistaken; and so I give you warnin.'

"But she laughed it off like, and says, 'Lor, Luke, what could have put such fancies into your head?'

"I says, 'If I've got fancies in my head it's you that have put 'em there; and I tell you once more I won't stand no nonsense, and if you want to keep secrets from the man as you're a goin' to marry, you'd better marry somebody else and keep secrets from him, for you won't do it from me, and so I tell you.'

"Upon which she begins to whimper a bit, but I takes no notice o' that, but begins to question her about my lady. I had the letter marked with the pencil cross in my pocket, and I wanted to find out how I was to deliver it.

"'Perhaps other people can keep secrets as well as you,' I said, 'and perhaps other people can make friends as well as you. There were a gentleman came here to see your missus yesterday, warn't there; a tall young gentleman with a brown beard?'

"Instead of answering of me like a Christian, my cousin Phœbe bursts out a cryin', and wrings her hands, and goes on awful, until I'm dashed if I can make out what she's up to.

"But little by little I got it out of her, for I

wouldn't stand no nonsense; and she told me how she'd been sittin' at work at the window of her little room, which was at the top of the house, right up in one of the gables, and overlooked the lime-walk and the shrubbery and the well, when she see my lady walkin' with a strange gentleman, and they walked together for a long time, until by-and-by they—"

"Stop," cried Robert Audley, "I know the rest."

"Well Phœbe told me all about what she see, and she told me as she'd met her lady almost directly afterwards, and somethin' had passed between 'em, not much, but enough to let her missus know that the servant what she looked down upon had found out that as would put her in that servant's power to the last day of her life.

"'And she is in my power, Luke,' says Phœbe, and she'll do anythin' in the world for us if we keep her secret.'

"So you see both my Lady Audley and her maid thought as the gentleman as I'd seen safe off by the London train was lyin' dead at the bottom of the well. If I was to give the letter

they'd find out the contrairy of this, and if I was to give the letter, Phœbe and me would lose the chance of gettin' started in life by her missus.

"So I kep' the letter and kep' my secret, and my lady kep' hern. But I thought if she acted liberal by me, and gave me the money I wanted, free like, I'd tell her everythink and make her mind easy.

"But she didn't. Whatever she give me she throwed me as if I'd been a dog. Whenever she spoke to me, she spoke as she might have spoken to a dog; and a dog she couldn't abide the sight on. There was no word in her mouth that was too bad for me. There was no toss as she could give her head that was too proud and scornful for me; and my blood biled agen her, and I kep' my secret, and let her keep hern. I opened the two letters and I read 'em, but I couldn't make much sense out of 'em, and I hid 'em away; and not a creature but me has see 'em until this night."

Luke Marks had finished his story, and lay quietly enough, exhausted by having talked so

long. He watched Robert Audley's face, fully expecting some reproof, some grave lecture; for he had a vague consciousness that he had done wrong.

But Robert did not lecture him; he had no fancy for an office which he did not think himself fitted to perform.

"The clergyman will talk to him and comfort him when he comes to-morrow morning," Mr. Audley thought; "and if the poor creature needs a sermon it will come better from his lips than from mine. What should I say to him? His sin has recoiled upon his own head; for had my lady's mind been set at ease, the Castle Inn would not have been burned down. Who shall dare to try and order his own life after this? who can fail to recognise God's hand in this strange story?"

He thought very humbly of the deductions he had made and acted upon. He remembered how implicitly he had trusted in the pitiful light of his own reason; but he was comforted by remembering also that he had tried simply and honestly

to do his duty; faithfully alike to the dead and to the living.

Robert Audley sat until long after daybreak with the sick man, who fell into a heavy slumber a short time after he had finished his story. The old woman had dozed comfortably throughout her son's confession. Phœbe was asleep upon the press bedstead in the room below; so the young barrister was the only watcher.

He could not sleep; he could only think of the story he had heard. He could only thank God for his friend's preservation, and pray that he might be able to go to Clara Talboys, and say, "Your brother still lives, and has been found."

Phœbe came up-stairs at eight o'clock, ready to take her place at the sick bed, and Robert Audley went away to get a bed at the Sun Inn, He had had no more comfortable rest than such odd snatches of sleep as are to be got in railway carriages and on board steamers, during the last three nights, and he was completely worn out. It was nearly dusk when he awoke out of a long dreamless slumber, and dressed himself

before dining in the little sitting-room, in which he and George had sat together a few months before.

The landlord waited upon him at dinner, and told him that Luke Marks had died at five o'clock that afternoon. "He went off rather sudden like," the man said, "but very quiet."

Robert Audley wrote a long letter that evening, addressed to Madame Taylor, care of Monsieur Val, Villebrumeuse; a long letter in which he told the wretched woman who had borne so many names and was to bear a false one for the rest of her life, the story that the dying man had told him.

"It may be some comfort to her to hear that her husband did not perish in his youth by her wicked hand," he thought, "if her selfish soul can hold any sentiment of pity or sorrow for others."

CHAPTER. IX.

RESTORED.

CLARA TALBOYS returned to Dorsetshire to tell her father that his only son had sailed for Australia upon the 9th of September, and that it was most probable he yet lived, and would return to claim the forgiveness of the father he had never very particularly injured; except in the matter of having made that terrible matrimonial mistake which had exercised so fatal an influence upon his youth.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys was fairly nonplussed. Junius Brutus had never been placed in such a position as this, and seeing no way of getting out of this dilemma, by acting after his favourite model, Mr. Talboys was fain to be natural for once in his life, and to confess that he had suffered much uneasiness and pain of mind about his only son, since his conversation with Robert Audley; and that he

would be heartily glad to take his poor boy to his arms, whenever he should return to England. But when was he likely to return? and how was he to be communicated with? That was the question. Robert Audley remembered the advertisements which he had caused to be inserted in the Melbourne and Sydney papers. If George had re-entered either city alive, how was it that no notice had ever been taken of that advertisement? Was it likely his friend would be indifferent to his uneasiness? But then, again, it was just possible that George Talboys had not happened to see this advertisement; and, as he had travelled under a feigned name, neither his fellow-passengers nor the captain of the vessel would have been able to identify him with the person advertised for. What was to be done? Must they wait patiently till George grew weary of his exile, and returned to the friends who loved him; or were there any means to be taken by which his return might be hastened? Robert Audley was at fault! Perhaps in the unspeakable relief of mind which he had experienced

upon the discovery of his friend's escape, he was unable to look beyond the one fact of that providential preservation.

In this state of mind he went down to Dorsetshire to pay a visit to Mr. Talboys, who had given way to a perfect torrent of generous impulses, and had gone so far as to invite his son's friend to share the prim hospitality of the square, red-brick mansion.

Mr. Talboys had only two sentiments upon the subject of George's story; one was a natural relief and happiness in the thought that his son had been saved; the other was an earnest wish that my lady had been *his* wife, and that he might thus have had the pleasure of making a signal example of her.

"It is not for me to blame you, Mr. Audley," he said, "for having smuggled this guilty woman out of the reach of justice, and thus, as I may say, paltered with the laws of your country? I can only remark that, had the lady fallen into *my* hands, she would have been very differently treated."

It was in the middle of April when Robert Audley found himself once more under those black fir-trees beneath which his wandering thoughts had so often strayed since his first meeting with Clara Talboys. There were primroses and early violets in the hedges now, and the streams, which, upon his first visit, had been hard and frost-bound as the heart of Harcourt Talboys had thawed, like that gentleman, and ran merrily under the black thorn bushes in the capricious April sunshine.

Robert had a prim bed-room, and an uncompromising dressing-room allotted to him in the square house, and he woke every morning upon a metallic spring-mattress which always gave him the idea of sleeping upon some musical instrument, to see the sun glaring in upon him through the square white blinds, and lighting up the two lacquered urns which adorned the foot of his blue iron bedstead, until they blazed like two tiny brazen lamps of the Roman period.

A visit to Mr. Harcourt Talboys was perhaps rather more like a return to boyhood and board-

ing-school than is quite consonant with the Sybarite view of human enjoyment. There were the same curtainless windows, and narrow strips of bedside carpet; the same clanging bell in the early morning; the same uncompromising servants filing into a long dining-room to assist at perhaps the same prayers; and there was altogether rather too much of the "private academy for the sons of gentlemen preparing for the church and the army," in the Talboys establishment.

But if the square-built, red-brick mansion had been the palace of Armida, and the prim, linen-jacketed man represented by a legion of houris, Robert Audley could have scarcely seemed better satisfied with his entertainment.

He awoke to the sound of the clanging bell, and made his toilet in the cruel early morning sunshine, which is bright without being cheerful, and makes you wink without making you warm. He emulated Mr. Harcourt Talboys in the matter of shower-baths and cold water, and emerged prim and blue as that gentleman himself, as the clock

in the hall struck seven, to join the master of the house in his ante-breakfast constitutional under the fir-trees in the stiff plantation.

But there was generally a third person who assisted in these constitutional promenades, and that third person was Clara Talboys, who used to walk by her father's side, more beautiful than the morning,—for that was sometimes dull and cloudy, while she was always fresh and bright,—in a broad-leaved straw hat and flapping blue ribbons, one quarter of an inch of which Mr. Audley would have esteemed a prouder decoration than ever adorned a favoured creature's button-hole.

Absent George was often talked of in these morning walks, and Robert Audley seldom took his place at the long breakfast table without remembering the morning upon which he had first sat in that room, telling his friend's story, and hating Clara Talboys for her cold self-possession. He knew her better now, and knew that she was one of the most noble and beautiful of women. But had she yet discovered how dear

she was to her brother's friend? Robert used to wonder sometimes if it were possible that he had not yet betrayed himself; if it could be possible that the love which made her very presence a magical influence to him, had failed to make itself known by some inadvertent glance, by some unconscious tremble in the voice, that seemed to take another tone when he addressed her.

The dull life in the square-built house was only relieved now and then by a stiff dinner party, at which a few country people assembled to bore each other by mutual consent; and by occasional inroads of morning callers, who took the drawing-room by storm, and held it for about an hour, to the utter discomfiture of Mr. Audley. That gentleman nourished sentiments of peculiar malevolence upon the subject of the fresh-coloured young country squires, who generally appeared with their mammas and sisters upon these occasions.

It was impossible, of course, that these young men could come within the radius of Clara's brown eyes without falling wildly in love with her; and it was impossible, therefore, that Robert

Audley could do otherwise than furiously hate them as impertinent rivals and interlopers. He was jealous of anybody and everybody who came into the region inhabited by those calm brown eyes; jealous of a fat widower of eight-and-forty; of an elderly baronet with purple whiskers; of the old women about the neighbourhood whom Clara Talboys visited and ministered to; of the flowers in the conservatory, which occupied so much of her time and distracted her attention from him.

At first they were very ceremonious towards each other, and were only familiar and friendly upon the one subject of George's adventures; but, little by little, a pleasant intimacy arose between them, and before the first three weeks of Robert's visit had elapsed, Miss Talboys made him happy, by taking him seriously in hand and lecturing him on the purposeless life he had led so long, and the little use he had made of the talents and opportunities that had been given to him.

How pleasant it was to be lectured by the woman he loved! How pleasant it was to

humiliate himself and depreciate himself before her! How delightful it was to get such splendid opportunities of hinting that if his life had been sanctified by an object, he might indeed have striven to be something better than an idle *flaneur* upon the smooth pathways that have no particular goal; that, blessed by the ties which would have given a solemn purpose to every hour of his existence, he might indeed have fought the battle earnestly and unflinchingly. He generally wound up with a gloomy insinuation to the effect that it was only likely he would drop quietly over the edge of the Temple Gardens some afternoon, when the river was bright and placid in the low sunlight, and the little children had gone home to their tea.

"Do you think I can read French novels and smoke mild Turkish until I am three-score-and-ten, Miss Talboys?" he asked. "Do you think that there will not come a day in which my meerschaums will be foul, and the French novels more than usually stupid, and life altogether

such a dismal monotony that I shall want to get rid of it somehow or other?"

I am sorry to say that while this hypocritical young barrister was holding forth in this despondent way, he had mentally sold up his bachelor possessions, including all Michel Levy's publications and half a dozen solid silver-mounted meerschaums, pensioned off Mrs. Malony, and laid out two or three thousand pounds in the purchase of a few acres of verdant shrubbery and sloping lawn, embosomed amid which there should be a fairy cottage *ornée*, whose rustic casements should glimmer out of bowers of myrtle and clematis to see themselves reflected in the purple bosom of a lake.

Of course Clara Talboys was far from discovering the drift of these melancholy lamentations. She recommended Mr. Audley to read hard and think seriously of his profession, and begin life in real earnest. It was a hard, dry sort of existence perhaps which she recommended; a life of serious work and application, in which he should strive to be useful to his fellow-creatures, and win

a reputation for himself. Mr. Audley almost made a wry face at the thought of such a barren prospect.

"I'd do all that," he thought, "and do it earnestly, if I could be sure of a reward for my labour. If she would accept my reputation when it was won, and support me in the struggle by her beloved companionship. But what if she sends me away to fight the battle, and marries some hulking country squire while my back is turned?"

Being naturally of a vacillating and dilatory disposition, there is no saying how long Mr. Audley might have kept his secret, fearful to speak and break the charm of that uncertainty which, though not always hopeful, was very seldom quite despairing, had not he been hurried by the impulse of an unguarded moment into a full confession of the truth.

He had stayed five weeks at Grange Heath, and felt that he could not, in common decency, stay any longer; so he had packed his portmanteau one pleasant May morning, and had announced his departure.

Mr. Talboys was not the sort of man to utter any passionate lamentations at the prospect of losing his guest, but he expressed himself with a cool cordiality which served with him as the strongest demonstration of friendship.

"We have got on very well together, Mr. Audley," he said, "and you have been pleased to appear sufficiently happy in the quiet routine of our orderly household; nay, more, you have conformed to our little domestic regulations in a manner which I cannot refrain from saying I take as an especial compliment to myself."

Robert bowed. How thankful he was to the good fortune which had never suffered him to oversleep the signal of the clanging bell, or led him away beyond the ken of clocks at Mr. Talboys's luncheon hour.

"I trust as we have got on so remarkably well together," Mr. Talboys resumed, "you will do me the honour of repeating your visit to Dorsetshire whenever you feel inclined. You will find plenty of sport amongst my farms, and you will meet with every politeness and attention from my

tenants, if you like to bring your gun with you."

Robert responded most heartily to these friendly overtures. He declared that there was no earthly occupation that was more agreeable to him than partridge shooting, and that he should be only too delighted to avail himself of the privilege so kindly offered to him. He could not help glancing towards Clara as he said this. The perfect lids drooped a little over the brown eyes, and the faintest shadow of a blush illuminated the beautiful face.

But this was the young barrister's last day in Elysium, and there must be a dreary interval of days and nights and weeks and months before the first of September would give him an excuse for returning to Dorsetshire. A dreary interval which fresh-coloured young squires, or fat widowers of eight-and-forty might use to his disadvantage. It was no wonder, therefore, that he contemplated this dismal prospect with moody despair, and was bad company for Miss Talboys that morning.

But in the evening after dinner, when the sun was low in the west, and Harcourt Talboys closeted in his library upon some judicial business with his lawyer and a tenant farmer, Mr. Audley grew a little more agreeable. He stood by Clara's side in one of the long windows of the drawing-room watching the shadows deepening in the sky and the rosy light growing every moment rosier as the day died out. He could not help enjoying that quiet *tête-à-tête*, though the shadow of the next morning's express which was to carry him away to London loomed darkly across the pathway of his joy. He could not help being happy in her presence; forgetful of the past, reckless of the future.

They talked of the one subject which was always a bond of union between them. They talked of her lost brother George. She spoke of him in a very melancholy tone this evening. How could she be otherwise than sad, remembering that if he lived—and she was not even sure of that—he was a lonely wanderer far away from all who loved him, and carrying the memory of a blighted

life wherever he went. In the sombre twilight stillness she spoke of him thus, with her hands clasped and the tears trembling in her eyes.

"I cannot think how papa can be so resigned to my poor brother's absence," she said, "for he does love him, Mr. Audley; even you must have seen lately that he does love him. But I cannot think how he can so quietly submit to his absence. If I were a man, I would go to Australia, and find him, and bring him back; if he was still to be found among the living," she added in a lower voice.

She turned her face away from Robert, and looked out at the darkening sky. He laid his hand upon her arm. It trembled in spite of him, and his voice trembled, too, as he spoke to her.

"Shall *I* go to look for your brother?" he said.

"*You!*" She turned her head, and looked at him earnestly through her tears. "You, Mr. Audley! Do you think that I could ask

you to make such a sacrifice for me, or for those I love?"

"And do you think, Clara, that I should think any sacrifice too great an one if it were made for you? Do you think there is any voyage I would refuse to take, if I knew that you would welcome me when I came home, and thank me for having served you faithfully. I will go from one end of the Continent of Australia to the other to look for your brother, if you please, Clara; and will never return alive unless I bring him with me, and will take my chance of what reward you shall give me for my labour."

Her head was bent, and it was some moments before she answered him.

"You are very good and generous, Mr. Audley," she said, at last, "and I feel this offer too much to be able to thank you for it. But —what you speak of could never be. By what right could I accept such a sacrifice."

"By the right which makes me your bounden slave for ever and ever, whether you will or no. By the right of the love I bear you, Clara," cried

Mr. Audley, dropping on his knees,—rather awkwardly, it must be confessed—and covering a soft little hand, that he had found half-hidden among the folds of a silken dress, with passionate kisses.

"I love you, Clara," he said, "I love you. You may call for your father, and have me turned out of the house this moment, if you like; but I shall go on loving you all the same; and I shall love you for ever and ever, whether you will or no."

The little hand was drawn away from his, but not with a sudden or angry gesture, and it rested for one moment lightly and tremulously upon his dark hair.

"Clara, Clara!" he murmured, in a low pleading voice, "shall I go to Australia to look for your brother?"

There was no answer. I don't know how it is, but there is scarcely anything more delicious than silence in such cases. Every moment of hesitation is a tacit avowal; every pause is a tender confession.

"Shall we both go, dearest? Shall we go as man and wife? Shall we go together, my dear love, and bring our brother back between us?"

Mr. Harcourt Talboys coming into the lamp-lit room a quarter of an hour afterwards, found Robert Audley alone, and had to listen to a revelation which very much surprised him. Like all self-sufficient people, he was tolerably blind to everything that happened under his nose, and he had fully believed that his own society, and the Spartan regularity of his household, had been the attractions which had made Dorsetshire delightful to his guest.

He was rather disappointed, therefore; but he bore his disappointment pretty well, and expressed a placid and rather stoical satisfaction at the turn which affairs had taken.

"I have only one more point upon which I wish to obtain your consent, my dear sir," Robert said, when almost everything had been pleasantly settled. "Our honeymoon trip, with your permission, will be to Australia."

Mr. Talboys was taken aback by this. He brushed something like a tearful mist away from his hard grey eyes as he offered Robert his hand.

"You are going to look for my son," he said. "Bring me back my boy, and I will freely forgive you for having robbed me of my daughter."

So Robert Audley went back to London, to surrender his chambers in Fig Tree Court, and to make all due inquiries about such ships as sailed from Liverpool for Sydney in the month of June.

He went back a new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes; with a life that was so entirely changed that he looked out upon a world in which everything wore a radiant and rosy aspect, and wondered how it could ever have seemed such a dull, neutral tinted universe.

He had lingered until after luncheon at Grange Heath, and it was in the dusky twilight that he

entered the shady Temple courts and found his way to his chambers. He found Mrs. Malony scrubbing the stairs, as was her wont upon a Saturday evening, and he had to make his way upward amidst an atmosphere of soapy steam, that made the bannisters greasy under his touch.

"There's lots of letthers, yer honour," the laundress said, as she rose from her knees and flattened herself against the wall to enable Robert to pass her, "and there's some parrcels, and there's a gentleman which has called ever so many times, and is waitin' to-night, for I towld him you'd written to me to say your rooms were to be airred."

"Very good, Mrs. M.; you may get me some dinner and a pint of sherry as soon as you like, and see that my luggage is all right if you please."

He walked quietly up to his room to see who his visitor was. He was not likely to be anybody of consequence. A dun, perhaps; for he had left his affairs in the wildest confusion when he ran

off in answer to Mr. Talboys's invitation, and had been much too high up in the sublime Heaven of love, to remember any such sublunary matters as unsettled tailors' bills.

He opened the door of his sitting-room, and walked in. The canaries were singing their farewell to the setting sun, and the faint, yellow light was flickering upon the geranium leaves. The visitor, whoever he was, sat with his back to the window and his head bent upon his breast. But he started up as Robert Audley entered the room, and the young man uttered a great cry of delight and surprise, and opened his arms to his lost friend, George Talboys.

Mrs. Malony had to fetch more wine and more dinner from the tavern which she honoured with her patronage, and the two young men sat deep into the night by the hearth which had so long been lonely.

We know how much Robert had to tell. He touched lightly and tenderly upon that subject which he knew was cruelly painful to his friend; he said very little of the wretched woman who

was wearing out the remnant of her wicked life in the quiet surburb of the forgotten Belgian city.

George Talboys spoke very briefly of that sunny seventh of September, upon which he had left his friend sleeping by the trout stream while he went to accuse his false wife of that conspiracy which had well nigh broken his heart.

"God knows that from the moment in which I sank into the black pit, knowing the treacherous hand that had sent me to what might have been my death, my chief thought was of the safety of the woman who had betrayed me. I fell upon my feet upon a mass of slush and mire, but my shoulder was bruised, and my arm broken against the side of the well. I was stunned and dazed for a few minutes, but I roused myself by an effort, for I felt that the atmosphere I breathed was deadly. I had my Australian experiences to help me in my peril, and I could climb like a cat. The stones of which the well was built were rugged and irregular, and I was able to work my way upwards by planting my feet in the

interstices of the stones, and resting my back at times against the opposite side of the well, helping myself as well as I could with my hands, though one arm was crippled. It was hard work, Bob, and it seems strange enough that a man who had long professed himself weary of his life should take so much trouble to preserve it. I think I must have been working upwards of half an hour before I got to the top; I know the time seemed an eternity of pain and peril. It was impossible for me to leave the place until after dark without being observed, so I hid myself behind a clump of laurel bushes and laid down on the grass faint and exhausted to wait for nightfall. The man who found me there told you the rest, Robert."

"Yes, my poor old friend—yes, he told me all."

George had never returned to Australia after all. He had gone on board the *Victoria Regia*, but had afterwards exchanged his berth for one in another vessel belonging to the same owners, and had gone to New York, where he had stayed as long as he could support the weariness of his

exile; as long as he could endure the loneliness of an existence which separated him from every friend he had ever known.

"Jonathan was very kind to me, Bob," he said; "I had enough money to enable me to get on pretty well in my own quiet way, and I meant to have started on the Californian gold-fields to get more when that was gone. I might have made plenty of friends had I pleased, but I carried the old bullet in my breast; and what sympathy could I have with men who knew nothing of my grief? I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob; the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life."

CHAPTER X.

AT PEACE.

Two years have passed since the May twilight in which Robert found his old friend; and Mr. Audley's dream of a fairy cottage has been realised between Teddington Locks and Hampton Bridge, where, amid a little forest of foliage, there is a fantastical dwelling-place of rustic woodwork, whose latticed windows look out upon the river. Here amongst the lilies and the rushes on the sloping bank, a brave boy of eight years old plays with a toddling baby who peeps wonderingly from its nurse's arms at that other baby in the purple depth of the quiet water.

Mr. Audley is a rising man upon the home circuit by this time, and has distinguished himself in the great breach of promise case of Hobbs *v.* Nobbs, and has convulsed the Court by his deliciously comic rendering of the faithless

Nobbs's amatory correspondence. The handsome dark-eyed boy is Master George Talboys, who declines *musa* at Eton, and fishes for tadpoles in the clear water under the spreading umbrage beyond the ivied walls of his academy. But he comes very often to the fairy cottage to see his father, who lives there with his sister and his sister's husband; and he is very happy with his uncle Robert, his aunt Clara, and the pretty baby who has just begun to toddle on the smooth lawn that slopes down to the water's brink, upon which there is a little Swiss boat-house and landing stage where Robert and George moor their slender wherries.

Other people come to the cottage near Teddington. A bright, merry-hearted girl, and a grey-bearded gentleman, who has survived the trouble of his life, and battled with it as a Christian should.

It is more than a year since a black-edged letter, written upon foreign paper, came to Robert Audley, to announce the death of a certain Madame Taylor, who had expired peacefully at

Villebrumeuse, dying after a long illness, which Monsieur Val describes as a *maladie de langueur*.

Another visitor comes to the cottage in this bright summer of 1861,—a frank, generous-hearted young man, who tosses the baby, and plays with Georgey, and is especially great in the management of the boats, which are never idle when Sir Harry Towers is at Teddington.

There is a pretty rustic smoking-room over the Swiss boat-house, in which the gentlemen sit and smoke in the summer evenings, and whence they are summoned by Clara and Alicia to drink tea, and eat strawberries and cream upon the lawn.

Audley Court is shut up, and a grim old housekeeper reigns paramount in the mansion which my lady's ringing laughter once made musical. A curtain hangs before the pre-Raphaelite portrait: and the blue mould which artists dread gathers upon the Wouvermanns and Poussins, the Cuyps and Tintorettis. The house is often shown to inquisitive visitors, though the baronet is not informed of that fact, and people admire my

lady's rooms, and ask many questions about the pretty, fair-haired woman, who died abroad.

Sir Michael has no fancy to return to the familiar dwelling-place in which he once dreamed a brief dream of impossible happiness. He remains in London until Alicia shall be Lady Towers, when he is to remove to a house he has lately bought in Hertfordshire, on the borders of his son-in-law's estate. George Talboys is very happy with his sister and his old friend. He is a young man yet, remember, and it is not quite impossible that he may by-and-by find some one who will be able to console him for the past. That dark story of the past fades little by little every day, and there may come a time in which the shadow my lady's wickedness has cast upon the young man's life, will utterly vanish away.

The meerschaums and the French novels have been presented to a young Templar, with whom Robert Audley had been friendly in his bachelor days, and Mrs. Maloney has a little pension paid her quarterly for her care of the canaries and geraniums.

I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace. If my experience of life has not been very long, it has at least been manifold; and I can safely subscribe to that which a mighty king and a great philosopher declared, when he said that neither the experience of his youth nor of his age had ever shown him "the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread."

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